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CHAUCER AND HIS TIMES

By GRACE E. HADOW

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CHAUCER AND HIS TIMES

BY

GRACE E. HADOW

LECTURER IN ENGLISH, LADY MARGARET HALL, OXFORD; LATE READER IN ENGLISH, BRYN MAWR COLLEGE, U.S.A.

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NOTES ON CHAUCER'S USE OF 'E'

1. Final *e* is usually sounded in Chaucerian verse, but
   (*a*) it is slurred over before a word beginning with a vowel, e.g. I noldë sette at al that noyse a grote ; before certain words beginning with *h*, such as *he ;* any part of the verb to *have ;* the adverbs *heer*, *how*, and a mute *h* as in *honour*—e.g. Tho redde he me how Sampson loste his heres :
   (*b*) it is sometimes dropped in certain words in common use such as *were*, *hadde*, *wolde*, etc.—e.g. Wolde go to bedde, he wolde no lenger tarie.
2. Middle *e* is sometimes dropped : e.g. hav(e)nes.
3. Final *e* should always be sounded at the end of a line.

These notes are based on the grammatical hints given in Professor Skeat's Introduction to his single-volume edition of Chaucer's complete works (Clarendon Press, 1901), from which the illustrations in this book are also drawn. To his researches and to those of Professors Lounsbury and Ten Brink, and of the members of the Chaucer Society, all students of Chaucer must gratefully acknowledge their indebtedness. In quoting from Chaucer I have kept to Professor Skeat's spelling. All attempts to modernise Chaucerian verse inevitably result in destroying something of the charm and melody of the original. Readers whose eyes are not accustomed to the forms of Middle English will find practically all difficulty disappear if they read the passages aloud with modern pronunciation. With other Middle English and Scottish poets I have reluctantly taken greater liberties, since their language is often more remote from the speech of to-day. An example of the original Scottish forms will be found on p. 240.

G. E. H.

CHAUCER AND HIS TIMES

CHAPTER I

CHAUCER'S LIFE AND TIMES

"THE biography of Chaucer is built upon doubts and thrives upon perplexities" according to one of the most famous of Chaucer scholars, and the more carefully we consider the evidence upon which this statement is based, the more fully do we find it endorsed. The name Chaucer itself has been variously derived from the Latin *calcearius*, a shoemaker, the French *chaussier*, a maker of long hose, and the French *chaufecire*, chafe-wax (*i. e.* a clerk of the court of Chancery whose duty consisted in affixing seals to royal documents). The one point of agreement seems to be that the family was undoubtedly of French origin, though whether the founder of the English branch came over with the Conqueror or in Henry III's reign, cannot be decided. Most scholars are now agreed that Geoffrey Chaucer was born about 1340, and

that his father was John Chaucer, a vintner of Thames Street, London, though at one time his birth was dated as early as 1328, and Mr. Snell, in his *Age of Chaucer*, endeavours further to darken counsel—already sufficiently obscure—by suggesting that there may have been two contemporary Geoffreys, and that the facts which are usually accepted as throwing light on the history of the poet may really apply to his unknown namesake. This theory, however, has at present no evidence to support it, and it is reasonable to assume that Chaucer was a native of London. Possibly it was his early association with the wine-trade that gave him such insight into its mysteries, and called forth the Pardoner's warning:—

Now kepe yow fro the whyte and fro the rede,
And namely fro the whyte wyn of Lepe,
That is to selle in Fish-strete or in Chepe.
This wyn of Spayne crepeth subtilly
In othere wynes, growing faste by,
Of which there ryseth swich fumositee
That when a man hath dronken draughtes three
And weneth that he be at hoom in Chepe,
He is in Spayne, right at the toune of Lepe.
(*Pardoners Tale*, l. 562, etc.)

And it is noteworthy that more than once

Chaucer goes out of his way to inveigh against drunkenness :—

A lecherous thing is wyn, and dronkenesse
Is ful of stryving and of wrecchednesse
. . . . . .
For dronkenesse is verray sepulture
Of mannes wit and his discrecioun.
(*Pardoners Tale*, l. 549–559.)

Of his early years we know nothing. Probably he lived the life of other boys of that time : Lydgate's portrait of the mediæval school-boy may well stand for a type :—

I had in custom to come to school late
Not for to learn but for a countenance,
With my fellows ready to debate,
To jangle and jape was set all my pleasaunce.
Whereof rebuked was my Chevisaunce [1]
To forge a lesyng and thereupon to muse
When I trespassed myselfe to excuse.
. . . . . .
Loth to rise, lother to bed at eve;
With unwashed handes ready aye to dinner;
My Paternoster, my Creed, or my Believe
Cast at the Cook; lo ! this was my manner;
Waved with each wind, as doth a reede-spear;
Snibbed [2] of my friends such taches [3] for to amend
Made deaf eare list nat to them attend.
(*Testament.*)

[1] So that I gained but little. [2] chidden by. [3] faults.

Leland, with that sublime disregard for anything so prosaic as evidence which characterises sixteenth-century biographers, declares that "Geoffrey Chaucer, a youth of noble birth and highest promise, studied at Oxford University with all the earnestness of those who have applied themselves most diligently to learning. . . . He left the University an acute logician, a delightful orator, an elegant poet, a profound philosopher, and an able mathematician"; and to this list of accomplishments he afterwards adds, "and a devout theologian." Fifty years later, Speght—to whom lovers of Chaucer are deeply indebted in other respects—equally authoritatively asserts that he was at Cambridge, but as he bases this assertion on a remark—

> Philogenet I called am far and near
> Of Cambridge clerk—

made by one of the characters in the *Court of Love*, a poem which scholars are now universally of opinion is not Chaucer's work, it has little weight. As a matter of fact Chaucer's name does not appear in the records of any college at either university, and, as Professor Lounsbury has conclusively shown, wide as are the poet's interests, and great as

his knowledge undoubtedly is, the scholarship shown by his works is not so remarkable as necessarily to imply close and protracted study. Classical legends were frequently embodied in the romances of an age in which, if we may believe Jean Bodel, himself a poet,

Ne sont que trois matières à nul homme entendant,
De France, et de Bretagne, et de Rome la grant,[1]

and the habit of treating Alexander the Great as if he were brother-in-arms to Roland and Oliver naturally opened the door to all sorts of embellishments and modifications. A veil of romance covers and colours the history of Greece and Rome. To Chaucer, Cleopatra is akin to the Lady of the Hideous Pass, or Morgan le Fay. The account of her death given in the *Legend of Good Women* (l. 671, etc.) is purely mediæval :—

(She) made her subtil workmen make a shryne
Of alle the rubies and the stones fyne
In all Egipte that she coude espye;
And putte ful the shryne of spycerye,

[1] There are but three histories to which any man will listen,
Of France, and of Britain and of Rome the Great.

And leet the cors embaume;[1] and forth she fette
This dede cors, and in the shryne hit shette.[2]
And next the shryne a pit than doth she grave;
And alle the serpents that she mighte have
She putte hem in that grave. . . .

. . . . . .

And with that word, naked, with ful good herte,
Among the serpents in the pit she sterte.[3]

Nor is this devout theologian always accurate in his references to Bible history. His allusions to Old Testament stories are full of mistakes, as, for instance, when he speaks (in *Book of Duchesse*, l. 738) of Samson slaying himself with a pillar for love of Delila. It was not an age of nice scholarship, or care for detail. Men used stories as they found them, and repeated them as they happened to remember them, and no one was hypercritical enough to refer to the original. More than half a century after Chaucer's death Caxton translates the *Æneid*, not from the Latin of Virgil, but from "a little book in French," and Gawain Douglas, the most scholarly of all the Scottish poets of the early sixteenth century, regards it as a moral

[1] And had the corpse (*i. e.* Antony's) embalmed.
[2] And forth she fetched this dead corpse, and shut it in the shrine.
[3] *sterte*, sprang.

allegory of the soul's progress, cast in the form of an epic. But while Chaucer's occasional mistranslations of Latin words and misrenderings of classical legends cannot be said to disprove his residence at one of the universities, they certainly cannot be said to support Leland's statement, and the probability is that he early became attached to the court. The reign of Edward III witnessed a marked increase in the prosperity of the merchant class. The members of the great trade guilds were men of wealth and importance and there is nothing surprising in finding a vintner's son one of the household of Elizabeth, wife of the king's son, Lionel, Duke of Clarence. In fact the seals of John Chaucer and Agnes his wife show that both bore arms. In 1357 we find, from the royal accounts, that Geoffrey Chaucer was provided with a paltok (cloak) costing four shillings, and a pair of red and black breeches and a pair of shoes, valued at three shillings, and in December of the same year he received a grant of 2*s.* 6*d.* "for necessaries against the feast of the Nativity" (Chaucer Soc., *Life Records of Chaucer*, p. xiv). The *Canterbury Tales* give abundant proof that their author had a keen eye for the niceties of dress, and at seventeen he had

doubtless a proper appreciation of new shoes and red and black breeches.

Two years later (1359) he served in the French wars and was taken prisoner at "Retters," a place which has been variously identified as Retiers, near Rennes, and Rethel, near Reims. He was liberated in March 1360, Edward III paying £16 (over £200 of our money) towards his ransom, which looks as if he were considered a person of some importance. Apparently he returned to court life in England, and to the duties of *valettus camerae regis*. A valet of the King's Chamber had to "make beddis, to beare or hold torches, to sett boardis, to apparell all chambres, and such othir seruices as the Chamberlain, or Vshers of the Chambre, comaunde or assigne, to attend the Chambre, to watch the King by course, to go in messages, etc." (*Life Records*, Pt. II, p. xi), and holders of the office must have had ample opportunity of acquiring the wisdom of Placebo:—

I have now been a court-man al my lyf.
And god it woot,[1] though I unworthy be,
I have stonden in ful greet degree
Abouten lordes of ful heigh estaat;
Yet hadde I never with noon of hem debaat.

[1] God knows.

I never hem contraried,[1] trewely;
I woot wel that my lord can[2] more than I.
What that he seith, I holde it ferme and stable;
I say the same, or elles thing semblable.[3]
A ful gret fool is any conseillour,
That serveth any lord of heigh honour,
That dar presume, or elles thenken it,
That his conseil sholde passe his lordes wit.
Nay, lordes been no foles,[4] by my fay.
(*Marchantes Tale*, l. 1492, etc.)

In 1366 a pension was granted to Philippa Chaucer, one of the damsels of the Queen's Chamber, and it is usually thought that this indicates Chaucer's marriage about this time, since in 1381 the money was paid "to Geoffrey Chaucer, her husband." Philippa seems to have been the sister—the Chaucer Society suggests, the sister-in-law—of Katherine Swynford, who became John of Gaunt's third wife, and this connection possibly helps to explain the consistent kindness shown to Chaucer by the House of Lancaster. Various attempts have been made to show that the marriage was an unhappy one. Some of these will be noticed later in treating of Chaucer's women, here it may suffice to say that although it is true that he paints a

[1] contradicted. [2] knows.
[3] or else something similar. [4] fools.

sufficiently gloomy picture of married life in the *Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton*, that neither the host nor the merchant are happy in their choice, and that the *Lenvoy* which concludes the *Clerkes Tale* warns husbands that if they expect to find their wives patient Griseldas they will certainly be disappointed, we have to remember that the shrewish wife was as stock a comic convention of those days as the shrewish mother-in-law of later times, and when it comes to taking away the character of Philippa Chaucer on the ground that her husband complains in the *Hous of Fame* that he is unaccustomed to be awakened gently, it is impossible not to feel that she is receiving unnecessarily harsh treatment. Equally slight is the evidence for his suffering from an unhappy love affair. In the *Parlement of Foules* (ll. 89, 90) he speaks of himself as

Fulfild of thought and besy hevinesse;
For bothe I hadde thing which that I nolde,[1]
And eek I ne hadde that thing that I wolde,

and commentators have leaped to the conclusion that he is here referring to his wife and a lady of high rank for whom he sighed in vain. In the same way when, in the *Book of the Duchesse*, he speaks of having suffered for

[1] I had the thing I did not want.

eight years from a sickness which one physician alone can cure, this is taken as an unmistakable reference to the same unrequited passion. But we have nothing to show that in these passages Chaucer is revealing his actual feelings. To be crossed in love is proper to every poet, and if his wife might have been justly annoyed when in 1382—at least sixteen years after his marriage—he wrote

> . . . I knowe not love in dede
> Ne wot how that he quyteth folk hir hyre,[1]
> (*Parlement of Foules*, ll. 8, 9.)

"Rosemounde"—if she had any real existence—can hardly have felt complimented by the affection of a poet who told her—and the world at large—

> Nas never pyk walwed in galauntyne
> As I in love am walwed and y-wounde.[2]

There is no proof one way or the other.

We know nothing of his children, except that in 1391 he wrote a treatise on the astrolabe for his little son Lewis, then ten years of age. Gascoigne, a generation after Chaucer's death, speaks of Thomas Chaucer, a well-known man of wealth and position in the early

[1] How he pays folk what he owes them.
[2] No pike ever so wallowed in a galantine
As I wallow and am entangled in love.

fifteenth century, more than once Speaker of the House of Commons, as Geoffrey's son, but no mention is made of him by Chaucer himself or by any of his contemporaries or immediate successors. John of Gaunt paid a considerable sum of money to place a certain Elizabeth Chaucer in the nunnery of Barking in 1381, but she is usually considered to have been the poet's sister.

In 1367 Chaucer himself was granted a pension of twenty marks a year for life, in recognition of his services, and in 1368 (or, according to Mr. G. C. Coulton, 1372) he was promoted to be an Esquire of the royal household. The duties of an esquire seem better suited to a poet than those of a valet : " These Esquires of houshold of old be accustumed winter & summer in afternoons & in eunings to drawe to Lordes Chambres within Court, there to keep honest company after there Cunninge, in talking of Cronicles of Kinges & of others pollicies, & in pipeing or harpinge, songinges or other actes marcealls, to helpe to occupie the Court, & accompanie estraingers till the time require of departing."

In 1369 a Geoffrey Chaucer was again with the army in France, but no particular adventures seem to have befallen him.

At this time John of Gaunt's influence was paramount at the English court, which may partly account for Chaucer's steady and rapid promotion. In 1370 he was sent abroad on an important mission—the exact nature of which we do not know—and two years later he went to Genoa to arrange which English port should become the headquarters of the Genoese trade. From Genoa he went to Florence, and by November 1373 he was back in England again.

When Chaucer went to Italy, Dante had already been dead for over fifty years, but Petrarch and Boccaccio, the other members of that great trilogy of the earlier Renaissance, were both alive. Chaucer makes his clerk declare that he learned the tale of Griselda

> . . . at Padowe of a worthy clerk,
> . . . . . .
> Fraunceys Petrark, the laureat poete,
> Highte this clerk, whos rethoryke sweete
> Enlumined al Itaille of poetrye,[1]
> (*Clerkes Prologue*, ll. 31–33.)

but it is impossible to say whether this is autobiographical or not. The two poets may

[1] Francis Petrarch, the laureat poet,
This clerk was called, whose rhetoric sweet
Illumined all Italy with poetry.

well have met, but in this, as in so many other cases, we cannot be certain. It is improbable that he ever met Boccaccio, since, largely as he borrows from the *Filostrato* and the *Teseide*, he never once mentions Boccaccio's name, and when, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, he confesses that he is indebted to an earlier poet for his story, he gives him the apparently fictitious name of Lollius. Mr. Coulton suggests that Boccaccio's works may have been published anonymously and that Chaucer may have been ignorant of their real author, and this could hardly have been the case if the two had met. But whether Chaucer had, or had not, any personal intercourse with Petrarch and Boccaccio, both their work and Dante's exercised marked influence upon him. More of this will be said in the next chapter; here it is sufficient to note that the Italian mission affected not only his material prosperity but also his literary development.

Meanwhile he continued to grow in favour at court. On St. George's Day, 1374, he was granted a daily pitcher of wine from the royal cellars—later commuted for a payment in money. In the following May he rented the gate-house of Aldgate from the corporation of London. A month later he was appointed

controller of customs for wool, etc., in the port of London, receiving a few days afterwards an additional pension of £10 a year from John of Gaunt and his wife. Office work seems to have weighed heavily on the poet, and there may well be truth in the complaint of the *Hous of Fame* (Bk. II, l. 644, etc.) that it cut him off from all intercourse with the world:—

> . . . thou hast no tydinges
> Of Loves folk, if they be glade,
> Ne of noght elles that god made;
> And noght only fro fer contree
> That ther no tyding comth to thee,
> But of thy verray neyghebores,
> That dwellen almost at thy dores,
> Thou herest neither that ne this;
> For whan thy labour doon al is,
> And hast y-maad thy rekeninges,
> In stede of reste and newe thinges,
> Thou gost hoom to thy hous anoon;
> And, also domb as any stoon,
> Thou sittest at another boke,
> Til fully daswed is thy loke,[1]
> And livest thus as an hermyte
> Although thyn abstinence is lyte.

In November 1375 Chaucer was granted the wardship of Edmund Staplegate of Kent. Few persons nowadays would welcome such

[1] Till fully dazed is thy look.

a charge, but in the fourteenth century the position of guardian was highly coveted, and not infrequently bought for a good round sum, since the holder had a right to a certain percentage (sometimes amounting to as much as 10 %) of the ward's property, to say nothing of the power of selling him (or her) in marriage. This particular wardship brought in £103.

In 1376–7 Chaucer was again employed on various secret missions abroad. In April 1377 he was sent to France to treat for peace with Charles V, for which service he received £48 13*s.* 4*d.* In June of this year Edward III died, but for a time John of Gaunt still retained his power, and soon after the accession of the boy king, Richard II, we find Chaucer sent on an embassy to

> Barnabo Viscounte,
> God of delyt, and scourge of Lumbardye.
> (*Monkes Tale*, ll. 408–409.)

Amongst those whom he appointed to act for him during his absence, was his friend and fellow-poet, John Gower.

In May 1380 occurred a curious incident, of which no full and satisfactory explanation has yet been found. By a deed dated May

1st, one Cecilia de Chaumpaigne releases Geoffrey Chaucer from a charge which she had brought against him *de raptu meo*. It has been suggested (*Camb. Hist. Lit.*, Vol. II) that this may refer to one of those attempts to carry off an heir or heiress and marry them forcibly to some relation of the abductor, which were not infrequent at the time. Chaucer's own father had been the victim of such an attempt, being kidnapped in order that he might be married to Joan de Westhale. The case had come before the courts and the jury found that " the defendants had by night forcibly abducted John le Chaucer from the plaintiff's custody, but did not marry him," and assessed the damages at £250. John Chaucer was under fourteen at the time, and there are instances of mere babies of four and five being carried off in the same way. One poor little lady was twice widowed and thrice married before she was nine. Whatever the facts may have been in connection with Cecilia de Chaumpaigne it is evident that Chaucer's influence at court was sufficient to protect him from any unpleasant consequences.

A year later (May 1382) to his controllership of wool was added that of petty customs. This probably meant a substantial increase

of income, but the poet, who found his original duties sufficiently irksome, does not seem to have looked with favour upon a corresponding increase in office hours. In February 1385 he was granted the privilege of appointing a permanent deputy to perform his official duties. Professor Skeat suggests that the expressions of gratitude towards the queen which are inserted in the later version of the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, point to the probability that he owed this unusual concession to her intervention.

About this time Chaucer seems to have given up his house over Aldgate and to have moved to Greenwich. The lease of the Aldgate house was made over to a certain Richard Foster in 1386, and in the *Lenvoy a Scogan* (written probably about 1393) Chaucer contrasts the lot of his friend,

> . . . that knelest at the stremes heed
> Of grace, of alle honour and worthinesse,

with his own fate at the other end of the same stream,

> Forgete in solitarie wildernesse,

and adds two footnotes to explain that he is referring in the first place to Windsor and in the second to Greenwich. If the description

in the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* is not mere poetic fiction, it would seem that the poet had a pleasant country house and garden in his "solitarie wildernesse," and that he cultivated the excellent habit of sleeping out of doors in the summer.

Meanwhile his activity found scope in various directions. He had been appointed a Justice of the Peace for Kent in 1381, and in 1386 he entered Parliament as one of the Knights of the Shire for the same county. In August of this year Chaucer's patron, John of Gaunt, went to Spain, and during his absence his brother and rival, Thomas, Duke of Gloucester, succeeded in establishing his ascendancy over the king. Chaucer felt the change at once. He was deprived of both his controllerships, and the money loss must have been considerable. In 1387 his wife died, so that her pension must also have lapsed. Evidently the poet was in straits, for in 1388 he was driven to raising money on his pensions and allowances, making them over to John Scalby of Lincolnshire. His abstinence, as we have seen, was "lyte," and the necessity for retrenchment must have been extremely galling.

The fall of Gloucester in 1389 swept away

the clouds which had darkened the poet's sky. Once more we find him filling one office after another, and engaged in such useful and prosaic occupations as superintending the repairs done to the banks of the Thames or the erection of scaffolds in Smithfield for the king and queen to view the tournament held there in May 1390. One of his appointments was that of Clerk of the Works to his Majesty, which gave him charge of the fabric of the Tower, Westminster Palace, Windsor Castle, and other royal residences. He was commissioner of the roads between Greenwich and Woolwich, and the post of sub-forester of North Pemberton Park (in Somerset) must have given him ample opportunity for studying

The bilder ook, and eek the hardy asshe;
The piler elm, the cofre unto careyne; [1]
The boxtree piper; [2] holm [3] to whippes lasshe;
The sayling firr; [4] the cipres, deth to pleyne; [5]
The sheter ew,[6] the asp for shaftes pleyne,[7]

if not—

[1] The box in which dead bodies are put.
[2] Suitable for pipes. [3] Evergreen oak.
[4] Tall fir.
[5] Cypress which mourns for death, *i. e.* is often found in churchyards.
[6] Yew-tree, of which bows are made.
[7] Aspen, suitable for making arrows.

The olyve of pees, and eek the drunken vyne

or—

The victor palm.

(*Parlement of Foules*, l. 176, etc. The whole passage is taken from Boccaccio's *Teseide*.)

The commissionership of roads can have been no sinecure. In 1499—after nearly a century more of development and civilisation —" a glover from Leighton Buzzard travelled with his wares to Aylesbury for the market before Christmas Day. It happened that an Aylesbury miller, Richard Boose, finding that his mill needed repairs, sent a couple of servants to dig clay called ' Ramming clay ' for him on the highway, and was in no way dismayed because the digging of this clay made a great pit in the middle of the road ten feet wide, eight feet broad, and eight feet deep, which was quickly filled with water by the winter rains. But the unhappy glover, making his way from the town in the dusk, with his horse laden with paniers full of gloves, straightway fell into the pit, and man and horse were drowned. The miller was charged with his death, but was acquitted by the court on the ground that he had no malicious intent and had only dug the pit to repair his

mill, and because he really did not know of any other place to get the kind of clay he wanted save the highroad" (Mrs. Green, *Town Life in the Fifteenth Century*, Vol. II, pp. 31–2). The modern traveller in the United States is sometimes surprised at dusk by finding the highway temporarily blocked by a house which is being moved from one side to the other and has been dumped down at the end of the day's work, but this is nothing to finding that the road itself has been removed bodily. It is true that the corporation of Nottingham issued an order in 1507 forbidding people to dig holes in the market-place without leave, but this was long after Chaucer's day, and if such ordinances were necessary to protect the actual market-place of a busy commercial city, it is not difficult to imagine the condition of country roads. The keeping of bridges in repair was looked upon, not as a matter of ordinary business, but as an act of piety, so that on the Continent special "Bridge Friars" existed, part of whose religious duties consisted in such work. In 1311–16 Richard of Kellawe, Bishop of Durham, offered forty days' indulgence to all those "who shall help by their charitable gifts, or by their bodily labour" in repairing

various roads and bridges (Jusserand, *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*, p. 4). And in 1353 a patent of Edward III had ordered the paving of the highroad from Temple Bar to Westminster, since "it is so full of holes and bogs . . . and the pavement is so damaged and broken" that traffic has become dangerous to man and beast. No wonder that robbers abounded, and that pilgrims found safety in numbers.

In 1390 highwaymen seem to have been particularly active, and the commissioner of roads himself was robbed more than once. Richard Brerelay was indicted for having "with others unknown" robbed Geoffrey Chaucer at Westminster of the sum of £10, on the Tuesday after the Nativity of the Virgin Mary (*i. e.* September 6); and in the same year "near the Fowle Ok" at Hatcham, in Surrey, Chaucer was robbed of a horse worth £10, goods worth 100 shillings, and £20 6*s.* 8*d.* in cash. Some, at least, of this seems to have been public money, for he was granted a royal pardon for the loss of £20 of the King's money taken from him "by some notable robbers."

In 1391 he lost his post as Clerk of the Works, but this does not seem to imply any serious loss of the royal favour, for three years later the

king granted him a pension of £20 (about £300 of our money) a year for life. During the interval he seems to have got into money difficulties, for no sooner was this grant made than his creditors promptly sued him for debt.

In 1398 he received an additional grant of wine—a tun a year for life—and was also promoted to be sole, instead of sub-, forester of North Pemberton. In 1399 the son of his earliest and most powerful patron came to the throne, and Chaucer, who was still struggling with his creditors, addressed an impassioned appeal to him. Already, in 1398, the poet had been threatened with legal proceedings, and although the king had entrusted him with various commissions in the country, he had not dared to leave his house for fear of arrest (Ten Brink, *History of English Literature*, Vol. II, p. 198). No wonder he sang:—

To you, my purse, and to non other wight
Compleyne I, for ye be my lady dere!
I am so sory, now that ye be light;
For certes, but ye make me hevy chere.

(*The Complaint of Chaucer to his Empty Purse.* Professor Ten Brink believes this poem to have been addressed to King Richard, but Professor Skeat has no doubt that it was addressed to Henry.)

It is consoling to learn that Henry IV added forty marks a year to the pension granted by King Richard, thus bringing Chaucer's income up to £600 or £700 of our money. This new outburst of good fortune promised well for the future, and Chaucer evidently looked forward to a prosperous and comfortable old age, for, on December 24, 1399, he took the lease of a house in the garden of St. Mary's, Westminster, for fifty-four years. He was not, however, to make long use of his new possession, for on October 25, 1400, he died, and his grave was the first to mark the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey. One of his later ballades, *Truth* may well serve as epitaph for the poet whom court life could never corrupt into a courtier, and whose clear sight and sharp wit never led him into bitterness or cynicism :—

That thee is sent, receyve in buxumnesse,[1]
The wrastling for this worlde axeth a fal.
Her nis non hoom,[2] her nis but wildernesse :
Forth pilgrim, forth! Forth beste out of thy stal!
Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al;
Hold the hye way, and lat thygost thee lede : [3].
And trouthe shal delivre, hit is no drede.[4]

[1] With cheerfulness. [2] Here is no home.
[3] Keep to the highway, and let thy spirit lead thee.
[4] And there is no fear but that truth shall deliver (thee).

CHAPTER II

CHAUCER'S WORKS

WHEN Chaucer began to write, English literature was at a low ebb. The Norman Conquest had practically killed the old alliterative poetry, and the passion and mysticism of Old English epic and lament had given way to the prim didacticism of interminable homilies in verse, or the jog-trot respectability of rhymed chronicles. "For a long time before and after 1100," says Professor Ker, "there is a great scarcity of English production," and the more ambitious attempts at verse which appeared in the twelfth, thirteenth, and early fourteenth centuries, are entirely lacking in the charm and dignity of pre-Conquest poetry. "The verse of Layamon's *Brut* is unsteady, never to be trusted, changing its pace without warning in a most uncomfortable way." Nor as a rule is the matter greatly superior to the manner. Such interest as is possessed by the majority of the poems of this period (apart from the definitely

historical or philological point of view) arises largely from the unconscious naïveté and simplicity of their authors. What hard heart could refuse to be touched by the difficulties which that saintly hermit Richard Rolle of Hampole had evidently experienced in distinguishing the sex of a baby, or to share in the triumph with which he suggests a solution of the difficulty:—

For unethes [1] is a child born fully
That it ne beginnes to yowle and cry;
And by that cry men may know then
Whether it be man or woman,
For when it is born it cries swa; [2]
If it be man it says "a, a."
That the first letter is of the nam(e)
Of our fore-father Adam.
And if the child a woman be,
When it is born it says "e, e,"
E is the first letter and the hede [3]
Of the name of Eve that began our dede.[4]

But delightful as this is, it is not poetry. In the middle of the fourteenth century come the notable exceptions of *Sir Gawayne*, *The Pearl*, and *Piers Plowman*, but by this time we are already drawing near the era of

[1] scarcely. [2] thus. [3] head. [4] death.
The passage is taken from Richard Rolle of Hampole's *Pricke of Conscience* (Morris and Skeat, *Specimens of Early English*, Part II, p. 103).

Chaucer himself. His poor Parson dismisses the popular alliterative verse of the day contemptuously enough:—

I can nat geste—rum, ram, ruf—by lettre—

but perhaps his strictures must not be taken too seriously, as he goes on to say:—

Ne, God wot, rym holde I but litel bettre—

a sentiment with which we can hardly imagine Chaucer to have been in sympathy. As a matter of fact, the lyric verse which lightens up the three hundred years from the Conquest to Chaucer, has a daintiness and grace which show that the poetic sense of England was by no means dead. *Sumer is icumen in, Lenten is come with love to toune, Of one that is so fair and bright*, and numberless other songs with which recent anthologies have made everyone familiar are sufficient evidence of this. But these are chance flowers blossoming haphazard beside the dusty highway.

One well-beaten track, it is true, does lead us through green glades and meadows enamelled with eye-pleasing flowers to the mysterious depths of enchanted forests haunted by fell enchanters and baleful

dragons, but the metrical romances are for the most part more or less direct translations from French originals, and show little that is distinctively English, beyond a tendency to cut the sentiment and come to the story.[1]

To French influence also we owe the development of satire. Old Norse and Icelandic poetry abound in instances of dry humour, but the Anglo-Saxon idea of repartee seems—if we may judge by pre-Conquest literature—to have consisted chiefly in such grim jests as baking the head of your enemy's son in a pie and inviting the father to dinner. Tenderness, passion, imagination, are to be found in such poems as *Beowulf*, the *Husband's Lament*, *Judith*, but it is not until French wit flashes across English seriousness that we travel to the Land of Cokaygne, where

> There are rivers great and fine
> Of oil, of milk, honey, and wine.
> Water serveth there for nothing
> Save to look at, and for washing:

or listen to Hendyng's shrewd comments on human nature:—

[1] For a comparison of the French with the English romances see Professor Ker's volume on *Medieval Literature* in this series, pp. 66–74.

Many a man saith, were he rich,
There shoulde none be me y-lyche [1]
To be good and free;
But when he hath ought bygeten [2]
All the freedom is forgeten
And laid under knee.
" He is free of his horse, that never had one,"
Quoth Hendyng.

The prose of the period is still less inspiring than the poetry. Not even Chaucer discovered that prose-writing is an art. Works of any importance were written in Latin, and such English prose as there was, consisted in sermons, lives of the saints, etc. Now and then some author happens upon a telling phrase or an apt illustration, but such instances are few and obviously accidental. French influence was too strong for native literature to put forth any very vigorous shoots of its own, and attempts to force homilies, scientific treatises, and historical records into French rhyme forms led to the production of such dreary works as the *Cursor Mundi* or Layamon's *Brut*.

By the fourteenth century, however, Normans and Saxons had long since begun to amalgamate, and the Hundred Years' War did much to foster the spirit of patriotism,

[1] like me. [2] obtained aught.

and thus weld together the conflicting elements of which the nation was composed. Different dialects prevailed in different parts of the country, but they were at least varieties of English, and English was the language of the people as a whole. French, whether of Paris or of Stratford atte Bowe, was learned as a foreign tongue, although as late as the end of the fourteenth century we still find Gower writing indifferently in Latin, French, and English. It needed only that there should arise an author great enough to establish some one dialect—or combination of dialects—as standard English, and this creation of language from dialect, we owe—among other things—in large measure to Chaucer.

London was already the centre of English trade and industry, and the circumstances of its position, which brought its inhabitants into contact with both Northerners and Southerners, made its dialect particularly suitable for the standard language of the country. Chaucer, as we have seen, was London born and bred, and wrote naturally in the "cokeneye" dialect, thus helping to establish it as the common speech. The modern reader who turns over the pages of

the *Ayenbite of Inwit* or the *Ancren Riwle* finds himself confronted by what is practically a foreign tongue; it is excusable if he finds even *Piers Plowman* baffling in places, and has difficulty in construing such passages as :—

He was pale as a pelet, in the palsye he semed,
And clothed in a caurimaury, I couthe it nou3te discreue;
In kirtel and kourteley, and a knyf bi his syde;
Of a freres frokke were þe forsleues,[1]

but Chaucer's English, full as it may be of old and decayed terms, presents few serious difficulties to any ordinary intelligence. We may have to look up a word here and there in the glossary, or find ourselves puzzled by some astronomical or chemical terms, but these are merely by the way, and Chaucer fairly lays claim to the title of Father, not only of English poetry, but of modern English.

In metre his work is no less remarkable. Professor Skeat, in his introduction to the Oxford edition of Chaucer's works, gives a list

[1] He was pale as a stone ball, in a palsy he seemed,
And clothed in rough cloth, I do not know how to describe it;
In an under-jacket and short coat, and a knife by his side;
The sleeves were like those of a friar's habit.
Piers Plowman, V. 78–81.

of no less than thirteen metres which he introduce into English poetry, consisting for the most part of modifications and alterations of French and Italian models.

The so-called Chaucerian stanza consists of seven lines of iambic verse rhyming *ababbcc—e. g.*:

Ămōng thĭse chīldrĕn wās ă wĭdwĕs sōnë
Ă lītĕl clĕrgeŏn, sēvĕn yēēr ŏf āgë,
Thăt dāy bў dāy tŏ scōlĕ wās hĭs wōnë,
Ănd ēēk ălsō, whĕr-ās hĕ saūgh th' ĭmāgë
Ŏf Crīstĕs mōdĕr, hādde⁀hĕ īn ŭsāgë
Ăs hīm wăs taūght, tŏ knēle⁀adōūn and sēyë
His *Āvĕ Mārie*,⁀ăs hē gŏth bў thĕ wēyë.

It is a modification of a form used by Boccaccio, and was itself possibly used by Spenser as the basis of his peculiar stanza. Chaucer employs it very largely for narrative purposes, preventing it from becoming monotonous by varying the place of the cæsura, and freely adding or suppressing weak syllables when he so desires. Mr. A. W. Pollard, in his article on Chaucer in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, declares that the English poet borrowed both his stanza and his decasyllabic line from Guillaume de Machault. The point of the whole matter, however, lies, not in whether Chaucer was indebted to French or Italian

sources for his metres, but in the fact that he revealed the latent possibilities of English as a poetic medium.

It is usual to divide Chaucer's life into three periods, and to speak of him as successively under French, Italian, and English influence, and although, as Professor Ker has pointed out, this method is open to some objections, it brings out certain critical points of interest and is worth adhering to for the sake of clearness.

French, as we have seen, had long been the dominant influence in English literature. To French erotic poetry we owe the elaborate code of duties owed by husband to wife and lover to mistress, and the whole artificial convention which prescribed unhappy love affairs and revelled in the minute analysis of over-strained emotion. "In poetry and life," says Ten Brink, "fashion required an educated young man, especially one in the service of the court, to fall in love at the earliest opportunity, and, if possible, hopelessly." We have already seen Chaucer obeying this convention in the *Book of the Duchesse* and the *Parlement of Foules*, and to these may be added the *Compleinte unto Pitè*, the *Compleint to his Lady*, *Merciles Beaute*,

To Rosemounde, Against Women Unconstant, An Amorous Compleint, and Book I, stanza 3 of *Troilus and Criseyde.* The poet protests so much that it is difficult to believe that he is describing anything more than a lover bewailing his unhappy lot (in the French fashion). Evidently French love-poetry appealed strongly to his imagination, for one of his earliest works is a translation of the famous *Romance of the Rose.* This long, allegorical poem (the original consists of over 22,000 lines), falls into two parts. The first, by Guillaume de Lorris, describes the search of the ideal lover for the mystic rose. The hero is admitted by the portress Idleness into a fair garden of flowers, where he finds Sir Mirth, Lady Courtesy, Dame Gladness, and many another gallant and debonair knight and lady. In this garden is the enchanted Well of Love, in whose depths the lover beholds the image of the Rose. He tries to seize it, and finds that a hard struggle lies before him ere he can hope to win the prize of love. Lorris left the poem unfinished, and the second part was added by Jean le Meung, a cynic with no very high opinion of women or of love. He introduces a sceptical friend who has a long conversation

with the lover in which he points out with extreme clearness the drawbacks of marriage and the frailties of women.

The English version of the poem consists of three fragments, A, B, and C (it is only 7,696 lines in all), and scholars are divided in opinion as to how much of the translation is actually by Chaucer himself. Professor Saintsbury, in the *Cambridge History of Literature* considers that Chaucer is probably the author of A, possibly the author of B, and probably not the author of C. He must, however, have been known as the translator of the later part, for in the *Prologue to the Legend of Good Women* (written about 1385), the god of love scolds the poet severely on the ground,—

Thou hast translated the Romauns of the Rose
That is an hereyse ageyns my lawe.

Another early work is the A.B.C., a hymn in honour of the Virgin, modelled upon a similar poem by Guillaume de Deguileville. Deguileville was well known as a devotional writer at the time, and according to Speght Chaucer's paraphrase was written "at the request of Blanch Duchesse of Lancaster, as a praier for her priuat vse, being a woman

in her religion very deuout." There is, however, no evidence of this, and Ten Brink believes that the A.B.C. dates from a later period when the poet was passing through a phase of deep religious feeling. Whatever the facts about this particular poem may be, it is interesting to notice that even in these early days Chaucer combined some of the qualities of a satirist with those of an idealist.

His first great original work was produced in 1369, when John of Gaunt's beautiful and charming young wife died. The *Book of the Duchesse* makes no pretence to originality of treatment. The poet, after a conventional lament over the conventional hard-heartedness of his mistress, falls into a conventional slumber in the course of which he has a conventional dream that he is following a conventional hunt in a conventional forest. Here he meets a handsome young man

> Of the age of four and twenty yeer
> . . . . . .
> And he was clothed al in blakke.

The young man is complaining to himself most piteously:—

> Hit was gret wonder that nature
> Might suffre(n) any creature
> To have swich sorwe and be not deed.

The poet is touched by his sorrow, and since they have evidently lost the hunt, he begs the mourner to tell him of "his sorwes smerte." This opens the way for a long, rambling lament, full of allusions to classical mythology. So involved is it, that the poet finds some difficulty in grasping the point, and cuts into a description of the lady's charms with a puzzled,—

Sir . . . wher is she now?

The brief answer—

I have lost more than thou wenest
. . . . . .
She is deed—

strikes a note of tragedy which is beyond the scope of the youthful poet as yet, and the elegy ends abruptly with

Is that your los? by god hit is routhe.[1]

The scheme of the poem is simple, the idea is borrowed from French laments, and whole passages are translated from de Machault's *Le Dit de la Fontaine Amoureuse* and *Remède de la Fortune*, but through all the stiffness and conventionality, all the obvious immaturity, there flash unmistakable signs of vigorous

[1] A pity.

and original genius. Every poet of the day finds himself wandering in a forest, but Chaucer alone meets

A whelp that fauned me as I stood,
That hadde y-followed, and coude no good,
Hit com and creep to me as lowe,
Right as hit hadde me y-knowe,
Hild doun his heed and joyned his eres
And leyde al smothe doun his heres;

or notices with tender amusement the

many squirelles, that sete
Ful hye upon the trees, and ete,
And in hir maner made festes.

The praises of many fair ladies were sung by troubadour and minstrel, but it would be hard to find another heroine possessed of the gaiety and vigour and charm of Blanche:—

I saw hir daunce so comlily
Carole and singe so swetely,
Laughe and pleye so womanly,
And loke so debonairly,
So goodly speke and so frendly,
That certes I trow that evermore
Nas seyn so blisful a tresore
. . . . . .
Therewith hir liste so wel to live,
That dulnesse was of hir a-drad.

Already Chaucer shows that truth to life, that impatience of artificiality which are to become two of his most striking characteristics.

A number of experiments in verse follow. Chaucer had a habit of rough-casting a poem, then leaving it for some time, and eventually using it in a more or less modified form in some later work. The story of *Ceys and Alcioun*, which forms part of the introduction to the *Book of the Duchesse*, originally appears to have been written as a separate poem, and between 1369 and 1379 we find no fewer than seven works, in prose and poetry, which were afterwards embodied in the *Canterbury Tales:* the *Lyf of St. Cecyle* (afterwards used for the *Second Nonnes Tale*); parts of the *Monkes Tale;* the greater part of the *Clerkes Tale; Palamon and Arcite* (which forms the basis of the *Knightes Tale*); the *Tale of Melibeus;* the *Persones Tale;* and the *Man of Lawe's Tale.* In addition to these come the *Compleint to his Lady; An Amorous Compleint; Womanly Noblesse; Compleint unto Pitè; Anelida and Arcite* (containing ten stanzas from Palamon); *Of the Wretched Engendring of Mankind* (a prose translation of Innocent III's *De Miseria Humanæ Conditionis*, of which the title alone remains, though fragments of it are used in

the *Man of Lawe's Tale*); a translation of Boëthius's *Consolations of Philosophy*; the *Complaint of Mars*; *Troilus and Criseyde*; *Wordes to Adam Scriveyn*; *The Former Age*; *Fortune*. Apart from *Troilus and Criseyde* and the poems afterwards used in the *Canterbury Tales*, none of these works are of any great importance in themselves, but in them we see a steady development in technical skill. The verse of the *Book of the Duchesse* is easy and flowing but not distinguished. The *Compleint unto Pitè* shows a freedom and boldness in the use of the French seven-lined stanza which marks a new departure in English versification. Chaucer tries his hand at roundels and balades, at narrative poetry and love laments, and the result is that he attains a suppleness and melody unknown to his predecessors and unfortunately ignored by his immediate successors. The music of his verse is not the least of his contributions to a literature, whose exponents could placidly remark

And trouthe of metre I sette also a-syde;
For of that art I hadde as tho no guyde
Me to reduce when I went a-wronge:
I toke none hede nouther of shorte nor longe.

Lydgate did not begin to write until after Chaucer's death, but the lines quoted above

from the *Troy Book* exactly express the point of view of the majority of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century poets.

In 1372, as we have seen, Chaucer went to Italy, and the influence of Italian poetry upon him can hardly be exaggerated. Professor Ten Brink believes that the influence of Dante was largely responsible for a sudden quickening and deepening of religious feeling in Chaucer, and he attributes the A.B.C., the *Lyf of St. Cecyle*, and the translation of the *De Miseria Humanæ Conditionis* to this period. Whether he is right or wrong in this respect (and Professor Skeat dates both the A.B.C. and the *Lyf of St. Cecyle* before the Italian journey) there can be no question as to Chaucer's profound admiration for the author of the *Divina Commedia*. The *Inuocacio ad Mariam* which prefaces the *Second Nonnes Tale* is drawn from the concluding canto of the *Paradiso*, the most striking of all the Monk's tales

> Of him that stood in greet prosperitee
> And is y-fallen out of heigh degree
> Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly,

is that of Count Hugo of Pisa, which is drawn direct from Canto XXXIII of the *Inferno*,

and it is impossible not to feel that the intense reverence for things holy which underlay all Chaucer's shrewdness and humour, may have been due—at least in part—to the influence of one of the greatest of all religious poets. Of Petrarch he speaks with admiration in the preface to the tale which he borrows from him, but except for a translation of the eighty-eighth sonnet which is inserted in Book I of *Troilus and Criseyde*, under the heading *Cantus Troili*, there is little evidence of any direct influence. From Boccaccio he borrowed freely, with a royal bettering in the borrowing. *Troilus and Criseyde* is taken bodily from the *Filostrato*, though with numerous additions, omissions, alterations, and adaptations: the *Knightes Tale* is condensed from the twelve books of the *Teseide:* the idea of the *Canterbury Tales* is taken from that of the *Decamerone*, though with the very significant difference that whereas Boccaccio's story-tellers are all drawn from one class and are shut off from intercourse with the outer world, Chaucer's range from knight to miller, from aristocratic prioress to bourgeois wife of Bath, and the fact of their being on a pilgrimage affords opportunity for incident on the way and for

the introduction of fresh characters, thus giving scope for far greater variety and keeping far more closely in touch with actual life.

Between 1377 and 1382 he translated Boëthius's *De Consolatione Philosophiæ*, a work which evidently produced a deep impression upon him.

In 1382 Chaucer produced another topical poem. So far he had addressed himself to John of Gaunt—for whom not only the *Book of the Duchesse*, but the scandalous *Compleint of Mars* is said to have been written; now he addresses King Richard, and after the fashion of the day clothes in allegorical compliment the story of his wooing of Anne of Bohemia, who had twice before been engaged to other suitors. The wedding festivities lasted over February 14, when St. Valentine marries every year,

The lyric lark, and the grave whispering dove,
The sparrow that neglects his life for love,
The household bird with the red stomacher;

and the opportunity was too good a one to be lost. Chaucer saluted his king and queen in the *Parlement of Foules*, which though partially based on the fabliau of *Hucline and Eglantine* and containing passages from Dante

and Boccaccio, is in all essentials a thoroughly original work. The poet, as usual, falls asleep and has a dream. He is taken by Scipio Africanus (he had just been reading the *Somnium Scipionis*), to the gate of a park which he is told none but the servants of Love may enter. Although he himself is but dull and has lost the taste of love he is permitted to see what passes in order that he may describe it, and is led into a beautiful garden in which many fair ladies, such as Beautee and Jolyte, are disporting themselves under the eye of Cupid. A number of women are dancing round a temple of brass, before whose door

Dame Pees sat with a curteyn in hir hond.

A long description of the temple and its occupants (Venus, Bacchus, Ceres, etc.) follows, and the poet then passes once more into the open air where

. . . in a launde[1] upon a hille of floures

he finds the "noble goddesse Nature," who has sent for every bird to come and choose its mate in honour of St. Valentine. Upon her hand she holds

[1] meadow.

A formel[1] egle, of shap the gentileste[2]
That ever she among hir werkes fonde.

Nature calls upon the royal eagle to make first choice, and he,

With hed enclyned and with ful humble chere,

at once chooses the bird upon her hand. Before the formel eagle has summoned up sufficient courage to give her answer,

Another tercel egle spak anoon,
Of lower kinde, and seyde, "that shal not be;
I love hir bet than ye do, by seynt John."

And hardly has he finished when a third eagle puts forward his claim. The various birds are called upon for their advice, and after a great deal of chattering and confusion, Nature finally decrees that the choice is to lie with the formel eagle herself. She modestly begs for a year's respite in which to make up her mind, and the parliament is adjourned.

But first were chosen foules for to singe
As yeer by yere was always hir usaunce
To singe a roundel at hir departinge
To do Nature honour and pleasunce,

[1] *i. e.* companion to another.
[2] of the most graceful shape.

and the whole ends with the charming roundel :—

Now welcom somer with thy sonne softe.

The poem has a freshness and tenderness which its conventional setting cannot conceal, and the humour of the conversation among the worm-foul, water-foul, and seed-foul, must have been even more delightful than it is to-day if—as has been suggested—the "fool cukkow," "the waker goos," "the popinjay, ful of delicacy," and the rest were easily recognisable portraits of contemporary courtiers.

The *Parlement of Foules* was followed by the *Hous of Fame*. Here again Chaucer makes use of the conventional stock-in-trade of medieval poets.

We have the dream, the strings of proper names drawn from Ovid and Virgil and the Bible, the constant moralisations, the temple to which the dreamer is guided, the use of allegory and symbol, all of which are common property. The influence of Dante is evident, and shows itself in detail as well as in the conception of the whole. The method of beginning each book with an invocation, the exact marking of the date on which the poem

was begun, the steep rock, the description of the house of Rumour, and numerous other points are borrowed direct from the *Divina Commedia*, while there is no need to emphasise the obvious resemblance between the general plan of Dante's great poem and the *Hous of Fame*. Professor Skeat even goes so far as to suggest that Lydgate is referring to the *Hous of Fame* when he speaks of a poem of Chaucer's as "Dant in English."

The poem is divided into three books. Book I opens with a discussion of dreams in general, what causes them and what weight should be attached to them:—

> Why that is an avisioun
> And this a revelacioun.

This is followed by an invocation to the god of sleep, and then comes the vision itself. The poet falls asleep on the tenth day of December, and dreams that he is in a temple of glass. On a tablet on the wall is engraved the history of "daun Eneas," and its recital occupies almost the whole of the book. When the poet has "seyen al this sighte" he passes out of the temple and finds himself in a desert place:—

Withouten toun, or hous, or tree
Or bush, or gras, or cred [1] lond.
. . . . . .
Ne I no maner creature
That is y-formed by nature
Ne saw.

Terrified by the strangeness and loneliness of the place, he casts his eyes towards heaven, praying to be saved,

Fro fantom and illusion,

and as he looks upwards he becomes aware of a wonderful eagle with feathers of gold, flying towards him. Book II opens with further remarks on dreams, and a declaration that no one, not even Isaiah or Scipio or Nebuchadnezzar, ever had such a dream as this. The story then continues. The eagle swoops down upon the poet and catches him up in " his grimme pawes stronge,"—

Me caryinge in his clawes starke
As lightly as I were a larke.

Dazed and astonished, Chaucer almost loses consciousness, till he is recalled to life by the eagle, with " mannes voice," bidding him

. . . . . Awak
And be not so a-gast for shame!

[1] plowed.

and adding in a well-meant attempt to cheer him up,—

. . . . Seynte Marie !
Thou art noyous for to carie.[1]

He is then told that as a reward for his long and faithful service of Cupid—

Withoute guerdon ever yit,

Jove has decreed that he is to be taken to the House of Fame:—

To do thee som disport and game,
In som recompensacioun
Of labour and devocioun.

In Fame's palace he will hear more wonders in two hours than there are grains of corn in a granary, for every sound made upon earth,—

Thogh hit were pyped of a mouse,

rises up there, multiplied and increased. Having concluded a learned disquisition on the properties of air, water, and sound—which he explains, he has kindly simplified n order to bring it within the grasp of a "lewed[2] man"—the eagle bears the poet

[1] Thou art hard to carry. [2] ignorant.

through the stars and past all manner of "eyrish bestes" until they reach the House of Fame. Here Chaucer is set upon his feet —much to his relief—and is told to enter; he is further warned that every sound which rises from earth may be not only heard but seen, since it takes the form of whatever made it. Book III opens with an invocation to Apollo. The poet then climbs the steep rock of ice on which the palace stands, noticing as he passes the names of famous men cut in the ice and rapidly thawing away in the sun. At the summit is a wonderful castle of beryl stone, and all round it crowd

> . . . alle maner of minstrales
> And gestiours,[1] that tellen tales
> Bothe of weping and of game,
> Of al that longeth unto Fame.

Amongst these are all the famous harpers and singers of old days, and close by stand

> . . . hem that maken blody soun
> In trumpe, beme [2] and clarioun.

A curiously carved gate gives admission to the castle, and entering, Chaucer finds a large

[1] tellers of tales or gestes. [2] trumpet.

number of knights-at-arms pouring out of a great hall. The hall itself is

> plated half a fote thikke
> Of gold . . .

and set with precious stones. Here the Lady Fame sits on a throne, her feet resting on earth and her head touching the heavens. The nine Muses sing her praises eternally, and on either side of her are pillars on which stand the historian Josephus and the poets Statius, Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, and Claudian :—

> The halle was al ful y-wis,
> Of hem that writen olde gestes,
> As ben on trees rokes nestes.

Suddenly a great noise is heard, and there bursts into the hall a multitude of people of every race and every condition come to prefer their requests to Fame. Some beg

> " That thou graunte us now good fame,
> And lete our werkes han that name;
> In ful recompensacioun
> Of good werk, give us good renoun; "

others said

> " Mercy, lady dere !
> To telle certain, as hit is,
> We han don neither that ne this
> But ydel al our lyf y-be.
> But, natheles, yit preye we,

That we mowe han so good a fame
And greet renoun and knowen name,
As they that han don nobel gestes . . ."

others—

" But certeyn they were wonder fewe," cried
" Certes, lady brighte,
We han don wel with al our mighte;
But we ne kepen have no fame.
Hyd our werkes and our name,
For goddes love ! for certes we
Han certeyn doon hit for bountee
And for no maner other thing."

Their requests are granted or refused with absolute capriciousness. Fame is attended by Eolus, who according to her direction blows a black trumpet called Sclaunder (Slander) or a golden clarion called Clere Laude (Clear Praise), and these trumpets are used as the whim takes her. Evil men have good fame, and good men are slandered, or on the other hand, both receive their deserts without any reason except Fame's good pleasure. As Chaucer stands watching the endless procession, a man approaches him and asks if he too has come to receive fame. The poet hastily protests against any such desire, and explains that he has come for—

Tydinges, other this or that
Of love, or swiche thinges glade.

The stranger bids him follow him to another place, and leads him to

An hous, that *domus Dedali*,
That *Laborintus* cleped is.

It is made of sticks and twigs and continually spins round and round :—

And ther-out com so greet a noise
That, had it stonden upon Oise,
Men mighte hit han herd esely
To Rome, I trowe sikerly.
. . . . .
And on the roof men may yit seen
A thousand holes, and wel mo,
To leten wel the soun out go.

This is the house of Rumour, to which come tidings

Of werre, of pees, of mariages,
Of reste, of labour of viages,[1]
Of abood [2] of deeth, of lyfe,
Of love, of hate, accorde, of stryfe, etc.

Here Chaucer meets the eagle again, who tells him that he is once more prepared to become his guide, and without more ado seizes him " bitweene his toon " and puts him in

[1] journeys. [2] delay.

through the window. The house is full of people all busy whispering in each other's ears :—

> Whan oon had herd a thing, y-wis,
> He com forth to another wight,
> And gan him tellen, anoon-right,
> The same that to him was told,
> Or hit a furlong-way was old,
> But gan somwhat for to eche
> To this tyding in this speche
> More than hit ever was.
> And nat so sone departed nas
> That he fro him, that he ne mette
> With the thridde; and or he lette
> Any stounde,[1] he tolde him als;
> Were the tyding sooth or fals,
> Yit wolde he telle hit natheless.

Out of the windows fly lies and truths, jostling each other, and Fame decides which shall prevail. Shipmen and pilgrims, pardoners and messengers, crowd into the house with boxes crammed with marvellous stories. In one corner of the great hall men are telling love stories, the poet goes to listen to these. Here, just when the climax appears to be in sight, the poem breaks off in the middle of a sentence. Remarkable as it is, full of humour and shrewd observation, and with signs of Chaucer's genius for narrative, it is not in

[1] before he uttered a sound.

his most characteristic vein. *Troilus and Criseyde* had already given promise of genius of a very different order, and it is possible that Chaucer himself grew weary of the smooth monotony of his own verse, and felt within him a growing impulse to produce something more human and more vivid. The *Hous of Fame* is an almost perfect example of a type of poem whose popularity was to continue undiminished for another century and more. It was imitated again and again, and a comparison between it and such works as Lydgate's *Temple of Glas* is sufficient to show the difference between genius and talent even when genius in working with not wholly congenial material. If Chaucer's reputation rested upon the *Book of the Duchesse*, the *Parlement of Foules*, the *Hous of Fame*, and the *Legend of Good Women*, a few scholars would know and appreciate his work, and anthologies would probably make the majority of readers acquainted with a few carefully-chosen extracts, but he would have done little or nothing to break down the literary conventions of his day. It would need a keen eye to discern in these the dawn of a new era, without the light thrown upon them by *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Canterbury Tales*.

The *Legend of Good Women* is said by Lydgate to have been written at the Queen's request. The general plan is taken from Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*, and Chaucer also translates freely from the *Heroides* and the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. The interest of the poem lies in the Prologue, which consists of nearly six hundred lines, and of which there are two distinct versions. The poet describes how in the spring he goes out into the fields to worship the daisy, and he gives a long and poetical description of this "emperice and flour of floures alle." That night he sleeps in a little arbour in his garden, and in a dream he sees the god of love leading by the hand a queen clothed in green and gold and of surpassing beauty. Here follows a ballad in her praise. A rout of ladies now appears, and they all kneel down and sing the praise of their queen. The poet kneels among them, but presently the god of love catches sight of him and declares that he is a traitor and heretic for he has translated the *Romance of the Rose*—

That is an heresye ageyns my lawe,

and has also written of the fickleness of Cressida—

Why noldest thou as wel han seyd goodnesse
Of women, as thou hast seyd wikkednesse?

The queen, who is none other than Alcestis, intercedes for him, reminding the irate god that the poet is also the author of the *Book of the Duchesse*, the *Parlement of Foules*, the story of *Palamon and Arcite*, to say nothing of

" . . many an ympne for your haly-dayes." [1]

and the *Lyf of St. Cecyle*. She therefore begs that he may be forgiven, and in token of true contrition he shall spend the most part of his time

In making of a glorious Legende
Of Gode Women, maidenes and wyves,
That weren trewe in lovinge al hir lyves.

The legends which follow are the result of this command, and the definition of virtue given above accounts for the inclusion of such "good women" as Cleopatra and Medea. The plan of the poem necessarily involved sameness of treatment. Chaucer grew tired of his heroines, and of the twenty legends which he seems to have planned, only nine were written. The stories of Cleopatra, Thisbe,

[1] many an hymn for your holy-days.

Dido, Hypsipyle and Medea, Lucretia, Ariadne, Philomela, Phyllis, and Hypermnestra, are strung together somewhat perfunctorily. As the names show, they are all drawn from Latin authors, but with the usual freedom of a medieval translator Chaucer does not hesitate to alter the originals to suit his purpose. He wishes to show the torments and constancy of love's martyrs, and without scruple he blackens the characters of Jason and Æneas and Theseus, in order to bring out the virtues of Medea, Dido, and Ariadne. The legends show little of the humour and freshness of Chaucer's other poems. Occasionally a description of the lover's passion recalls some similar passage in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the mere fact that the interest centres in emotion rather than action is in itself of importance, but Hercules, in the legend of Hypsipyle, is a poor substitute for Pandarus, and the perpetual recurrence of the love *motif* tends to weaken its effect. The two versions of the Prologue show many interesting points of difference. Mention has already been made of the supposed intervention of the Queen, through which Chaucer obtained permission to appoint a deputy to assist him in his office work. It is supposed that this

incident must have occurred after the writing of the first prologue and before the writing of the second, for while the whole poem is written in Queen Anne's honour, the second prologue contains numerous passages expressing the poet's gratitude and affection, which are not found in the first. She is

. . . . of alle floures flour,
Fulfilled of al vertu and honour.
. . . . . .
She is the clernesse and the verray light
That in this derke worlde me wynt and ledeth,
. . . . . .
For as the sonne wol the fyr disteyne [1]
So passeth al my lady sovereyne,
That is so good, so fair, so debonaire;
I prey to god that ever falle hir faire!

Another striking change in the second version is the omission of certain too explicit lines in which the poet had dared to set forth the duties of kings towards their subjects. Part of this wise advice still remains, but evidently Chaucer found it dangerous to call Richard's attention to the necessity for hearing his people's petitions and complaints, and the later version contents itself with a more general statement that kings should

[1] will make fire dim.

. . . . nat be lyk tiraunts of Lumbardye
That han no reward but at tirannye.

It is also noteworthy that several words which appear in their older form in the first version are modernised in the second (*e. g.* in the first line *sythes* becomes *tymes*), so that it is possible to see the language in actual process of development.

Chaucer's last and greatest work, the *Canterbury Tales*, was begun in 1386—though as has been shown, certain isolated tales, or rough sketches for tales, were already in existence—and the composition continued till 1389, when it—like so many of his other poems—was left unfinished. A number of fugitive pieces and lyrics also date from about this time, as does the prose *Treatise on the Astrolabe* written for his little son, Lewis.

The popularity of Chaucer's poetry is shown not only by repeated references to him as master and teacher, made by his immediate successors, but by the entire Chaucer apocrypha which soon sprang into being. Some genuine works of his—such as the *Book of the Lion* (this very probably was no more than a translation of Machault's *Le Dit du Lion*), have been lost, but to make up for this a number of poems have been

attributed to him, some of which were not written until years after his death. Subjoined is a list of the more important of these, with the names of the real authors in cases where scholars have succeeded in tracing them.

The Testament of Love. Thomas Usk (*d.* 1386).

La Belle Dame sans Merci. Sir R. Ros (fifteenth century).

The Cuckoo and the Nightingale (sometimes called *The Book of Cupid God of Love*). Sir Thomas Clanvowe.

The Flower and the Leaf; The Assembly of Ladies. Considered by some scholars to be the work of the same hand. Both purport to be written by a woman.

The Court of Love.

The Second Merchant's Tale, or *The Tale of Beryn* (containing a preliminary account of the Pardoner's adventures in Canterbury).

The Complaint of the Black Knight. Lydgate.

The Tale of Gamelyn. This poem is included among the MSS. of the *Canterbury Tales.* Professor Ten Brink suggests that Chaucer may have intended to work it up into the Yeoman's tale.

The Letter of Cupid. Occleve.

CHAPTER III

CHAUCER'S TREATMENT OF HIS SOURCES

THE sin of plagiary is a development of modern civilisation. To medieval authors, as to Elizabethan, the interest of a story lay in the telling, and while plot was of first-rate importance the same plot could quite well be used indifferently by any number of writers. Indeed, they did not hesitate to go even further and to form a patchwork of scraps taken from different authors, so that the plot may be drawn from one poet, fragments of the dialogue from another, and descriptive or reflective passages from a third, and yet the whole may be justly reckoned the work of the compiler. In the *Parlement of Foules*, for instance, Chaucer takes the idea of the whole from a current fabliau, the first eighty-four lines from Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, three distinct passages from Dante, the description of the garden from Boccaccio, and lines 95–105 from Claudian, and yet the originality of the whole is incontestable. It is a noteworthy fact that he tries his hand

at almost every form of poetry popular in his day, he writes romances, lives of the saints, homilies, allegorical poems, topical satire, love songs, and fabliaux, and in every case he borrows wherever he sees anything likely to suit his purpose, he alters and adds and omits as he sees fit; yet it is only necessary to compare a story (that of Constance, for instance) as told by him, with the same as told by any other poet of the day, to see why it is impossible for a genius to be a plagiarist.

Chaucer's treatment of romance is particularly characteristic. As has been said, the medieval romance is the most intrinsically interesting literary development of the period from the Conquest to Chaucer. Very roughly speaking, romances may be said—apart from allegorical works such as the *Romance of the Rose*—to fall into two classes, those, such as *Guy of Warwick*, or *Sir Ferumbras*, in which adventure and action form the chief interest, and those, such as *Aucassin and Nicolette*, or *Florice and Blanchefleur*, in which the stress is laid on emotion. In both cases the action is usually set in motion by the hero's desire to ingratiate himself with his lady, but in the one he rides off in quest of renown that may make him worthy to aspire to her hand, and

probably does not see her again for years; in the other, though he may perform doughty deeds for her sake, he may even go so far as to refuse battle unless he may have his sweet love, and much space is devoted to the description of his sighs and tears. In both, the emotion is perfectly simple and straightforward. The knight wishes for the lady's hand and fights or sulks, as the case may be, until he gets it, but in the former type there is scope for indefinite digressions and interminable adventures, while the latter, at all events in England, is apt to be shorter. Occasionally some opening is given for a more complex treatment of character, but as a rule the opportunity is ignored. Guy, when he returns to Felice after many years of adventure, lives with her only forty days. Then he becomes pensive and downcast, for it occurs to him

> How he had done many a man wo,
> And slain many a man with his hand,
> Burnt and destroyed many a land,
> And all was for woman's love,
> And not for God's sake above,

and he leaves her for ever, that he may give himself to penance and fight for the glory of God. Here is a fine opportunity for tragic

emotion, but although we are told that Felice thinks of killing herself, the whole episode is so perfunctorily related and the purpose of it is so evidently to provide occasion for fresh adventures that it is impossible to feel the slightest sympathy with either husband or wife. In *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight* the remorse of Gawayne after he has failed to keep his word is finely suggested, but the whole poem is far in advance of most romances of the period, and even here the magic setting rather detracts from the human interest. It is impossible to feel that it is a fair fight when one of the combatants can be beheaded without inconvenience to himself. The magic castles and enchanted swords, the dragons and sorcerers of medieval romance have a fascination of their own, but it is the fascination of sheer story-telling, not of character study. The love romances might naturally be expected to show evidence of a more analytical mind, but the feelings they describe are too obviously conventional to be very convincing, and though there is an undeniable charm in works of this sort, there is an equally undeniable sameness. Their strength lies, not in dramatic force of emotion, but in daintiness of description. Nicolette escaping from her

turret chamber, with her skirts kilted behind and before for fear of the dew, Florice borne to Blanchefleur's chamber in a basket of flowers, are pictures which can never lose their freshness, but we grow weary of the perpetual swoons and tears of every lover, and the small variety of characters introduced, the fact that practically all belong to the same class and are distinguishable only as villains or heroes, base enchantresses or noble ladies, intensifies the monotony. To this must be added the dreary jingle of the verse, which almost invariably consists of short, rhyming couplets, the lines constantly having to be eked out by expletives and meaningless monosyllables.

Chaucer showed himself fully alive at once to the possibilities and the absurdities of the romance. In the *Knightes Tale* we have an excellent example of the romance of adventure. It is based upon Boccaccio's *Teseide*, but while the *Teseide* is an epic in twelve books, the *Knightes Tale* consists of only 2,250 lines. The poet who set out to write a romance seems as a rule to have had no sense either of time or of unity. The hero sets out on his travels and in the first forest glade he comes to, meets a stranger knight. The two at once

joust. After unheard-of prowess the hero unhorses the stranger and unlaces his vizor. The strange knight no sooner recovers his senses than he sets to work to relate his totally irrelevant adventures, and the reader is lucky if in the course of those adventures the still more irrelevant life-story of some other knight is not introduced. Not till some hundreds of lines have been thus occupied do we come back to the original hero who has all this while been left in the glade. The *Teseide*, as has been said, is an epic rather than a romance, and its twelve books afford scope for such episodes as the war of Theseus with the Amazons, his marriage with Hippolyta, the obsequies of those who fall in the combat between Palamon and Arcite, etc., etc. Chaucer in turning epic into romance has shown an extraordinary power of condensation. The conventional romance writer seems to have had no idea of proportion, no conception that one incident could be of more importance than another, or that it could be necessary to slur over one episode and concentrate on another. In the *Knightes Tale* Chaucer shows the instinct of the true story-teller. The account of the war with the Amazons and Theseus' marriage—which occupies two books of the

Teseide—is reduced to twelve lines, which briefly tell us the bare facts. Theseus and Hippolyta are kept in the background throughout that the figures of Palamon, Arcite, and Emily may stand out the more clearly. The story moves steadily and rapidly, without a single digression. Occasionally, indeed, a little more explanation would be welcome. Who, for instance, was the friend by whose aid Palamon broke prison after seven weary years? Was it the gaoler's daughter, as the *Two Noble Kinsmen* would have us believe, or did his servant bribe a physician to help him, as the *Teseide* relates? Chaucer merely whets our curiosity by stating that he drugged the gaoler, and hurries on to describe his meeting with Arcite. It is this very speed, this close-knitting of the story, which marks it out from other poems of the kind. The characterisation is slight. Palamon and Arcite might well be, not cousins but twins, so closely do they resemble each other. Emily, sweet and gracious as she is, scarcely seems more than a fair vision of girlhood. Only now and then, as in the thumb-nail sketch of the crowd watching the knights assemble for the tourney, or in some sudden aside, such as his comment on Arcite's death—

> His spirit chaunged hous, and wente ther,
> As I cam never, I can nat tellen wher—

do we catch a glimpse of Chaucer's shrewd observation and dry humour. He is learning how to tell a tale, and for the moment his interest lies in the telling.

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, his method is very different. Here he is dealing with a love romance, and he does not hesitate to dwell at length upon the sufferings and emotions of his hero and heroine. About a third of the whole work is actual paraphrase or translation of Boccaccio's *Filostrato :* Book IV contains a lengthy extract from Boëthius, and certain passages are drawn from Guido delle Colonne, but the *Filostrato* forms the basis of the whole. This being so, the first thing we notice is that whereas in the *Knightes Tale* Chaucer has very considerably cut down his original, here he has enlarged it, for the 5,704 lines of Boccaccio's poem have become 8,329 in the English version. Further, he has taken considerable liberties with the characters themselves. Troilus is in many respects a conventional enough hero. He falls in love with Cressida at first sight and at once despairs of winning her. Handsome, brave, and resolute, he is well fitted to

gain the love of any woman, but such is his modesty that he is incapable of helping himself and can do nothing more to the purpose than sit on his bed and groan. The unnecessary mystery made by the lovers, the endless difficulties which they put in their own way, are quite in keeping with the spirit of the age, though even here Chaucer shows a skill in characterisation which almost makes us forget to be impatient with his hero's helplessness. Cressida, while she too has much in common with the conventional heroine of romance, has much that is peculiarly her own. She is beautiful and tender and clinging, as a heroine should be, but her shallow little character has an individuality of its own. It will be treated more fully in a later chapter, here it is sufficient to say that Chaucer transforms the mature woman of Boccaccio's poem into a timid girl, whose youth and inexperience appeal to our pity and make it impossible to judge her harshly. But the most important and characteristic change which Chaucer makes in the story is in the character of Pandarus. Instead of the gay young cousin of Troilus, he gives us the vulgar, gossiping, good-natured old uncle of Cressida, an utterly unimaginative and prosaic person who plays with the fires

of passion as ignorantly and light-heartedly as the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. Not only is the character of Pandarus of interest in itself but its creation and its introduction into a poem of this type marks a new development in literature—the study of the common-place. Hitherto, though some rare flash of humour might for an instant lighten the pages of the love romance and give us such an episode as that of the herd-boy in *Aucassin and Nicolette*, it was but a flash. The interest was concentrated in the hero and heroine, and though some faithful servant or lady-in-waiting might assist their lovers, it would have been regarded as undignified in the extreme to give prominence to such a character. Chaucer flings dignity to the winds. What he cares for is truth to life, and already he has made the great discovery that certain persons are not told off by nature to be unhappy and certain others to be amusing, but that a perfectly common-place and ordinary individual may play a part in tragedy without even realising what tragedy is. He studies a man, not because he is unusual, but just because he is the kind of person to be met with any day, and by using Pandarus as a foil he prevents the high-flown

emotion of the lovers from becoming absurd or monotonous.

Chaucer evidently realised to the full the attractiveness and the dramatic possibilities of this form of literature, but at the same time his eyes were open to its shortcomings. In the *Squieres Tale* we have a typical romance in which love, magic, and adventure are all blended together. It has the true medieval air of having all eternity in which to tell its story. It begins with an account of King Cambinskan, his two sons Algarsif and Cambalo, and his daughter Canace, and the coming of the magic gifts—the steed of brass which will carry its rider whithersoever he desires, the mirror which shows if any adversity is about to befall its owner, the ring which enables its wearer to understand the speech of the birds and also gives knowledge of the healing properties of all herbs, and the sword whose edge will cut through any armour and the flat of whose blade will cure the wound so made Any one of these would in itself be sufficient to furnish forth a tale, and when we find them heaped together with so lavish a hand at the very beginning, we know what to expect. Three hundred and four of the squire's 361 lines are occupied with the

apparently irrelevant story of the love-lorn falcon and the faithless tercelet. Even this is not ended. Canace uses her knowledge of simples for the poor hawk's benefit, and cures its wounds and swears to redress its wrongs; but having got thus far the narrator draws breath and then plunges into a list of further episodes with which he intends to deal:—

Thus lete I Canace hir hauk keping;
I wol na-more as now speke of hir ring,
Til it come eft to purpos for to seyn
How that this faucon gat hir love ageyn
Repentant, as the storie telleth us.
. . . . . .
But hennes-forth I wol my proces holde
To speke of aventures and of batailles,
That never yet was herd so grete mervailles.
First wol I telle yow of Cambinskan,
That in his tyme many a citee wan;
And after wol I speke of Algarsyf,
How that he wan Theodora to his wyf,
For whom ful ofte in greet peril he was,
Ne hadde he ben holpen by the steed of bras;
And after wol I speke of Cambalo
That faught in listes with the brethren two
For Canacee, er that he mighte hir winne,
And ther I lefte I wol ageyn beginne.

It is here that the Franklin breaks in, and in the most courteous and charming manner succeeds in checking the story, of which the

pilgrims have evidently had as much as they want, and in skilfully leading up to his onw tale. Nothing could give a more vivid impression of youth and exuberance than the Squire's naïve enjoyment of the marvellous adventures which he describes: the story is exactly suited to the teller, and his sublime unconsciousness of the fact that any one else can possibly find it long or quail before the prospect of a tale which bids fair to last all the way to Canterbury and back, is just what we should expect of this

. . . . . lusty bacheler
With lokkes crulle,[1] as they were leyd in presse.
Of twenty yeer of age he was, I gesse
. . . . . .
Embrouded[2] was he, as it were a mede
Al ful of fresshe floures, whyte and rede.
Singinge he was, or floytinge[3] al the day;
He was as fresh as is the month of May.

No wonder he tells of enchanted steeds and magic rings, of joust and tourney. And in showing the charm and youthfulness of the Squire, Chaucer also contrives to show us the charm, and we might almost add the youthfulness, of the popular romance. It is difficult to believe that the *Squieres Tale* was left

[1] curled locks. [2] embroidered. [3] playing the flute.

unfinished by chance. The manner in which it is cut short not only lights up the characters of the Squire and the Franklin in a manner eminently characteristic of Chaucer, but also gently satirises the long-windedness and absurdity of the romance-writers; and that Chaucer was keenly alive to their faults is shown by the rollicking burlesque of *Sir Thopas*. The *Squieres Tale* forms, as it were, a half-way house between the serious treatment of romance in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knightes Tale*, and the pure parody of Chaucer's own "tale of mirthe."

Sir Thopas parodies not only the matter but the manner of the romance writers. It out-Herods Herod in the intolerable jingle of its verse and the absurdity of its extra syllables, while the adventures of Sir Thopas and the fairy queen prove too much even for the pilgrims, ready as they are to be interested in a story of any kind.

Sir Thopas wex a doghty swayn,
Whyt was his face as payndemayn [1]
His lippes red as rose;
His rode [2] is lyk scarlet in grayn,
And I you telle in good certayn
He hadde a semely nose,

[1] fine flour. [2] complexion.

drones the poet, and no wonder after bearing a couple of hundred lines, the host breaks in with,

"No more of this, for goddes dignitee
. . . . . .
Myn eres aken of thy drasty [1] speche;
Now swiche a rym the devel I biteche!
This may wel be rym dogerel," quod he.

Considerations of space make it impossible to take in detail Chaucer's treatment of all his various sources. Like Shakespeare, he rarely troubles to invent a plot for himself, and Professor Skeat's table shows but one of all the *Canterbury Tales* for which no original has yet been found. In the brief consideration of his treatment of romance as a whole two points stand out conspicuously: in the first place his skill in simple narration, and in the second his interest in action as revealing character rather than for its own sake. In the *Canterbury Tales* he shows greater certainty in the delineation of character, greater readiness to trust to his readers' discrimination. Instead of describing characters at length, he gives us an occasional comment, or leaves us to see for ourselves the

[1] worthless.

meaning of some significant action, and the consequence is that every addition or omission that he makes is worthy of careful attention. Three typical instances may be taken as illustrating his method: the *Man of Lawes Tale*, the *Nonne Preestes Tale*, and the story of Count Hugo of Pisa in the *Monkes Tale*.

The story of Constance is taken from the Anglo-Norman chronicle of Nicholas Trivet. Trivet's version, which is in prose, is considerably longer than Chaucer's. It begins, undramatically, by speaking of the virtue and prosperity of Maurice, "a very gracious youth, and wondrously strong for his age, and wise and sharp of wit. According to the history of the Saxons aforesaid, he was the son of Constance, the daughter of Tiberius, by a king of the Saxons, Alle,"[1]—thus doing away with all suspense as to Constance's fate, and showing at the outset that the story is to have a happy ending. The chronicle then goes on to lay stress on the learning of the princess, who was instructed not only in the Christian faith but also in the seven sciences, logic, physics, morals, astronomy,

[1] The translations are taken from *Chaucer's Originals and Analogues*, published by the Chaucer Society.

geometry, music, and perspective,[1] and in various tongues. When she was thirteen, there came to her father's court certain Saracen merchants, and Constance, hearing of the rich merchandise they had brought, went down to inspect it and to question them concerning their land and creed. Finding that they were heathen, she at once proceeded to convert them, and such was her eloquence that before returning to their own land, they were all baptised. Nor were they content with this, for on their arrival in Saracenland, they began to preach the new doctrine. The Sultan sent for them, that his wise men might rebuke them, but they refuted the arguments of the heathen, and then "began to praise the maid Constance, who had converted and fully instructed them, for very high and noble wit and wisdom, and great marvellous beauty, and gentleness, and nobleness of blood." So deep an impression did they make on their lord that he was "greatly overcome with love for the maiden" and promptly dispatched these same merchants, and with them a heathen Admiral, to demand her in marriage. Tiberius sent back the messengers with great honour,

[1] This unusual list of the seven sciences is that given by Trivet.

giving his consent if his prospective son-in-law on his part would agree to become a Christian. "And the Admiral, before the Sultan and all his council, vowed himself to the Christian faith, if the Sultan should consent." The impatient lover soon agreed, and Constance accordingly set sail for Saracenland under escort of "a cardinal bishop, and a cardinal priest, with a great number of clergy, and a senator of Rome, with noble chivalry and great and rich array, and with a great number of Christians who went thither, some on pilgrimage, others to take possession of Jerusalem." The Sultan's mother, seeing her religion in danger, determined to rid the land of these invaders. Having made a covenant with seven hundred Saracens, who swore to aid her, she invited all the Christians to a great feast, professing that she herself desired to embrace their religion. At a given signal the seven hundred Saracens fell upon the unarmed guests, and of the whole number there escaped but three young men and Constance herself. The Sultan, the Admiral, and the other converts were involved in the general massacre. The three young men fled to Rome, where they told the Emperor that his daughter had perished with the rest.

Constance, having refused to renounce her faith, "for no fair promise of wealth or honour, nor for any threat of punishment or death," is set adrift in an open boat, with provision enough to last her for three years, and also with all the treasure which she had brought with her as a bride. For three whole years she drifts about on the great ocean. "Then, in the eighth month of the fourth year, God who steered the ship of the holy man Noah in the great flood, sent a favourable wind, and drove the ship to England, under a castle in the kingdom of Northumberland, near Humber." Elda, the warden of the castle, goes down to ask her of her condition. "And she answered him in Saxon . . . as one who was learned in divers languages, as is aforesaid." The good warden receives her hospitably, and his wife Hermingild becomes so enamoured of the maiden "that nothing could happen to her that she would not do according to her will." Then follows the conversion of Hermingild and Elda owing to a miracle wrought by Constance upon a blind man. Elda tells Alle, King of Northumberland, of the wonderful maiden at his castle, and Alle is about to visit her when dire distress falls upon the three friends. A felon knight,

to whose suit Constance has turned a deaf ear, murders Hermingild and contrives that suspicion shall fall upon Constance. Elda cannot believe her capable of such treachery, whereupon the accuser swears upon the gospels and upon his baptism, "which he had already lately received," that Constance is the criminal. Scarcely had he ended the word, when a closed hand, like a man's fist, appeared before Elda and all who were present, and smote such a blow on the nape of the felon's neck, that both his eyes flew out of his head, and his teeth out of his mouth; and the felon fell smitten down to the earth. And thereupon a voice said in the hearing of all, "Against Mother Church thou wert laying a scandal: this hast thou done, and I have held my peace." On Alle's arrival the felon is condemned to death, and so struck is the king by what has passed that he is himself baptised, and then marries Constance. Six months later he is called away by a border raid. During his absence the queen is delivered of a fair boy, and letters are sent to the king to tell him the good news. Once again, however, Constance is unfortunate enough to possess a mother-in-law who hates her: "For she had great disdain that King

Alle had, for the love of a strange woman whose lineage was unknown to him, forsaken his former religion." The messenger rests at her house at Knaresborough, and the queen-mother gives him an evil drink, and then alters his letters, telling King Alle that his wife is an evil spirit in the form of a woman, "Whereto witnesseth the child born of her, which resembles not a human form, but a cursed form hideous and doleful." With rare justice and self-restraint Alle writes back to his lords, bidding them take no steps against the queen or her child until he himself can return and inquire into the matter. Again the foolish messenger stays the night at Knaresborough, and again the queen-mother tampers with the letters. Under the king's seal she writes to the lords and bids them set Constance and her child adrift in an open boat, that she may leave the land in like manner that she came to it. The king's word is obeyed, and amidst the lamentations and tears of all the people Constance is put on board a ship "without sail or oar or any device." The ship is driven to the coast of Spain, where a certain heathen Admiral befriends her. His seneschal, a renegade knight named Thelous, persuades Constance

that he wishes to repent of his sins and return to the Christian faith, and prays her to take him with her, that he may come to a land of Christians. Once alone with her, he reveals his true purpose. Constance begs him to look out and see if there is no land in sight, and then comes privily behind his back and thrusts him into the sea. Meanwhile Alle, having discovered his mother's treachery, puts her to death, and vows never to marry again. Constance is eventually rescued by mariners and brought to Rome. She learns that her father has avenged her supposed death upon the Saracens, but instead of revealing her identity she lives for twelve years with a noble couple called Arsemius and Helen. At the end of that time Alle visits Rome, and Constance's son, Maurice, is invited to be present at the feast in his honour. Constance bids the youth make a point of serving the King of England. Alle, struck by Maurice's likeness to Constance, inquires what his origin may be, and by this means recovers his wife and child. Tiberius proclaims Maurice his heir and "companion in the Empire." Constance returns to England with her husband, but six months later, hearing that her father is dying, she comes

back to Rome, where she herself dies a year later.

The story is worth telling in some detail because it shows how closely Chaucer keeps to his original when it suits his purpose. The Man of Lawe does not alter a single point of any importance. He makes no attempt to soften down the improbabilities of the story or reduce the miraculous element. After all, he is himself going on a pilgrimage to the wonder-working shrine of St. Thomas à Becket, and shrewd man of the world as he is, there is nothing in the history of Constance to strain his credulity. But whereas in Trivet the characters are mere lay figures set up to illustrate the power of Christianity and the evil fate which befalls the opponents of Mother Church, in Chaucer they have an individuality of their own. Instead of alienating our sympathy at the outset by insisting on the learning and missionary enterprise of a child of thirteen, Chaucer omits all this and follows the more natural path of making the foreign chapmen so struck by the good report which they hear of the emperor's daughter, that having once seen her, and proved her beauty for themselves, when after their custom they go to tell the Soldan what wonders they have

met with on their travels, they in turn inflame his imagination by their description. The brief dialogue between Constance and her father, when the marriage has been arranged, is Chaucer's own interpolation, and its note of despair prepares us for what is to follow:—

> Allas! unto the Barbre nacioun [1]
> I moste anon, sin that it is your wille;
> But Crist, that starf [2] for our redempcioun
> So yeve me grace his hestes [3] to fulfille;
> I, wrecche womman, no fors though I spille [4]
> Wommen are born to thraldom and penance,
> And to ben under mannes governance.

Here we have no priggish and self-righteous virgin setting forth with smug self-satisfaction to convert Saracenland, but a lonely, timid girl, whose heart misgives her at the thought of leaving her parents and going to meet an unknown husband. Equally vivid and effective is Chaucer's picture of the Soldan's wicked mother, who not only professes readiness to accept baptism herself but advises her fellow-conspirators to do the same on the ground—

> Cold water shal not greve us but a lyte,[5]

[1] barbarous nation.
[2] died.
[3] commands.
[4] no matter if I am lost.
[5] grieve us but a little.

and adds with savage humour that by the time she has done with her son's wife,

> She shal have nede to wasshe awey the rede,
> Thogh she a font-ful water with hir lede.

The marriage festivities are passed over lightly, and then comes a characteristic interpolation which Chaucer borrows from quite a different source, *i. e.* from Innocent III's *De Miseria Humanæ Conditionis*:—

O sodeyn wo! that ever art successour
To worldly blisse, spreynd [1] with bitternesse;
Th'ende of the joye of our worldly labour;
Wo occupieth the fyn of our gladnesse.[2]
Herke this conseil for thy sikernesse,
Upon thy gladde day have in thy minde
The unwar wo or harm that comth behinde.

Then come a few brief words describing the massacre and Constance's unhappy fate, followed by the beautiful prayer of Constance when she finds herself alone on "the salte see," of which no trace at all is to be found in Trivet. Here the poet breaks off to discuss the miraculous element in the story. Nothing is more characteristic of Chaucer than this habit of pausing to consider some abstract question raised by what he is relating—it

[1] sprinkled. [2] All our joy ends in woe.

is even more conspicuously evident in the *Nonne Preestes Tale* than it is here, where such a discussion is in keeping with the spirit of the poem, and where he shows himself content to take the simple explanation of religion.

The episode of Elda and Hermingild is given very simply and shortly, Elda's name not being mentioned. Then comes the false accusation brought against Constance by the treacherous knight, and here we see Chaucer's power of painting a dramatic situation in a few words. He tells us how Constance is brought before the king and gives her brief prayer to the God " that savedest Susanne," and then with a sudden vivid simile drives home to us her agony of suspense :—

Have ye nat seyn som tyme a pale face
Among a prees, of him that hath be lad
Toward his deeth, where-as him gat no grace,
And swich a colour in his face hath had,
Men mighte knowe his face, that was bestad,
Amonges alle faces in that route :
So stant Custance, and loketh hir aboute.

Her marriage with Alle, Chaucer dismisses even more hastily than her marriage with the Soldan :—

Me list nat of the chaf nor of the stree
Maken so long a tale as of the corn.
What sholde I tellen of the royaltee
At mariage, or which cours gooth biforn
Who bloweth in a trompe or in an horn?
The fruit of every tale is for to seye,
They ete, and drinke, and daunce, and singe, and pleye.

The mishap of the messenger causes him to break out into an invective against drunkenness, and then follows one of the most wonderful passages in the whole poem, that in which he describes Constance going down to the boat "with deedly pale face," her baby weeping in her arms. Chaucer's love of children manifests itself again and again in his poems. The tenderness of the mother's

"Pees litel sone, I wol do thee non harm"

as she binds her kerchief round the child's eyes is far more moving in its simplicity than the most harrowing description could be. And here again, as Constance lulls the baby in her arms, Chaucer puts into her mouth a beautifully simple and touching prayer to the Virgin Mother:—

"Thou sawe thy child y-slayn bifor thy yën,
And yet now liveth my litel child, parfay!
Now, lady bright, to whom alle woful cryen,

Thou glorie of wommanhede, thou faire
may,[1]
Thou haven of refut, brighte sterre of day
Rewe on [2] my child, that of thy gentilesse
Rewest on every rewful [3] in distresse."

With these words on her lips she turns to Elda and holding up the child cries

"And if thou darst not saven him for blame,
So kis him ones in his fadres name,"

and without further complaint

She blesseth hir; and in-to ship she wente.

The whole passage has a breathing human passion in it of which Trivet's chronicle knows nothing. We forget the absurdity of the story, the impossible repetition of an impossible situation, and see only a cruelly wronged wife and mother meeting her fate with simple dignity and faith.

Trivet gives us lurid details concerning the vengeance that falls on Alle's mother. Chaucer, who never takes pleasure in horrors, remarks briefly that he "his moder slow," and hastens on to tell of Constance's adventures off the coast of Spain. Here again, we find a break in the narrative, as the author pauses to comment on the evils of self-indulgence, and

[1] maid. [2] have pity on. [3] rueful being.

to explain how God sends weak women the "spirit of vigour" that they may save themselves in time of need. The rest of the story follows Trivet's chronicle very closely, though the description of Alle's meeting with his wife is Chaucer's own:—

I trowe an hundred tymes been they kist,
And swich a blisse is ther bitwix hem two
That, save the joye that lasteth evermo
Ther is non lyk, that any creature
Hath seyn or shal whyl that the world may dure.

And he also adds a brief comment on the instability of human happiness.

It will be seen that Chaucer tends to reduce descriptive passages pure and simple to a minimum, and so far to condense the actual narrative that it moves quickly and straightforwardly, while at the same time he expands any situation which affords opportunity for the display of character, adds dialogue and intensifies emotion, and also shows a disposition to comment on what he is describing.

The *Nonne Preestes Tale* is based on Marie de France's fable of the *Cock and the Fox*, though it is possible that Chaucer's more immediate source was an enlargement of this, called the *Roman de Renart*. The *Cock and*

the Fox consists of but thirty-eight lines, and the *Roman de Renart* of 453, whereas the *Nonne Preestes Tale* consists of 626 lines, so that here we have a case in which Chaucer enlarges his original very considerably. In fact he can hardly be said to have borrowed more than the bare outline of the story.

In the first place, the whole description of the "poore widwe" and her poultry-yard is entirely Chaucer's. There is nothing in the French to correspond to the delightful picture of Chauntecleer strutting among the submissive hens—

> Of which the faireste hewed on hir throte
> Was cleped faire damoysele Pertelote,

or singing "my lief is faren in londe"[1] in sweet accord with his love. Then the incident of the dream is entirely altered. The French author makes dame Pinte, the hen, expound the dream to her husband and warn him of the danger which lies before him. Chaucer draws inimitable portraits of the fussy, self-important cock, thoroughly frightened and yet too conceited to accept his wife's simple and prosaic suggestion that his terrors spring from indigestion, and of the sensible, practical

[1] my love has gone away.

hen with her scathing contempt for the husband who though he has a beard has yet "no mannes heart." And here follows a lengthy disquisition on dreams, the cock overwhelming his sceptical wife with examples of warnings which have been fulfilled, and illustrations drawn from the most varied sources. Having restored his self-esteem by reference to the histories of Joseph, St. Kenelm, Crœsus, Andromache and others,

Royal he was, he was namore aferd.

The advent of the fox gives Chaucer another opportunity to discuss fore-knowledge, and suddenly, in the midst of this lightest and most amusing of skits, we find him gravely considering the question of predestination and free-will. He comes to no conclusion, but after stating various learned opinions, shrugs his shoulders and turns aside with a dry:—

I wol not han to do of swich matere;
My tale is of a cok, as ye may here . . .

The dialogue between the cock and the fox is much the same in both versions, though as Dr. Furnivall points out (*Chaucer's Originals and Analogues*, p. 112), Chaucer improves the story by omitting the spring made by the fox

before he begins to flatter Chauntecleer; but Pinte shows none of the extremely proper feeling displayed by Pertelote when she sees her husband carried off before her eyes :—

But soverynly dame Pertelote shrighte
Ful louder than dide Hasdrubables wyf,
Whan that hir housbond hadde lost his lyf,
And that the Romans hadde brende Cartage.

The peculiar characteristic of the English version is its all-pervading sense of humour, the gravity with which we are led on step by step until we find ourselves accepting the most ridiculous situations, and the extraordinary skill with which the characters of Chauntecleer and Pertelote are drawn.

In the *Monkes Tale* Chaucer draws his stories of the falls of illustrious men from all kinds of sources. The heroes range from Lucifer to Pedro the Cruel, and the worthy monk chooses his illustrations apparently at random, now from sacred history, now from the classics, now from contemporary life. No great dramatic skill is to be expected of the narrator, and for the most part the tragedies succeed one another with placid regularity, the occasional comments made by the monk himself showing no particular insight or intelligence. Having described the fall of

Sampson, for instance, no more inspiring reflection occurs to him than

That no men telle hir conseil til hir wyves
Of swich thing as they wolde han secree fayn,
If that it touche hir limmes or hir lyves.

One tale, however, stands out conspicuously above the rest. In the *Inferno* (Canto XXXIII) Dante had told the story of Count Hugo of Pisa, who was locked up in a tower with his sons and starved to death. In a few grim words he describes the father's despair and the slow death of the wretched sons:—

When we came
To the fourth day, then Gaddo at my feet
Outstretch'd did fling him, crying, "Hast no help
For me, my father?" There he died; and e'en
Plainly as thou seest me, saw I the three
Fall one by one 'twixt the fifth day and sixth:
Whence I betook me, now grown blind, to grope
Over them all, and for three days aloud
Call'd on them who were dead. Then, fasting got
The mastery of grief.
(Carey's translation.)

Chaucer takes this and uses it as the basis of one of his tragedies. In Dante the actual

story occupies fifty-nine lines, in Chaucer it occupies fifty-six, so in this case there is little in the way either of condensation or expansion. The changes which Chaucer makes are, however, very significant. Dante simply says that the three sons of Count Hugo suffer with their father. Chaucer enhances the pathos by telling us that

The eldeste scarsly fyf yeer was of age.
Allas, fortune ! it was greet crueltee
Swiche briddes for to putte in swiche a cage !

When Dante's Count Hugo hears

. . . at its outlet underneath lock'd up
The horrible tower . . .

he is so turned to stone that he can find no relief in tears. Chaucer's cries,

" Allas ! . . . that I was wrought."
Therewith the teres fillen from his yën.[1]

Chaucer gives us a moving picture of the little three-year-old looking up and asking

" Fader, why do ye wepe !
Whan wol the gayler bringen our potage,
Is ther no morsel breed that ye do kepe ?
I am so hungry that I may nat slepe . . ."

and finally lying down in his father's lap, and kissing him, and dying. The stern horror of

[1] eyes.

Dante's story is too terrible to admit of pathos such as this. Chaucer's version is infinitely touching, but it has nothing in it that chills our blood as does the picture of the father, grown blind with hunger, groping over the dead bodies of his children till fasting gets the mastery of grief. He can depict innocent suffering, he can arouse our sympathy and stir our pity, but he never strikes the note of real tragedy. It is not only that no one of his many heroes and heroines experiences any tragic conflict of soul, but in the simple presentation of suffering Chaucer shows little of that power of grim suggestion, of appeal to the imagination, which are among the most essential characteristics of the tragic poet. Cressida's hesitation has nothing grand or tragic about it. She is simply uncertain which course will bring her most happiness. And her repentance—if such it can be called—is no more than a momentary discomfort at the thought that she has caused Troilus pain and that unkind things are likely to be said of her. Troilus suffers, but, in Professor Bradley's phrase, it is suffering that merely befalls him, the whole tragedy is external, and his abandonment of passion has none of the dignity and restraint of a great emotion. Othello's

cry of "Desdemona, Desdemona dead!" contains more poignancy of suffering than all the outbursts of Troilus put together. Constance, and Griselda, and Dorigen all know the meaning of sorrow, but their simple acceptance of their fate is pathetic rather than tragic, and in the cases of Constance and Griselda, as in the case of Count Hugo, the tragedy is further softened by the part played by the children. The monk's definition of tragedy—though it need not necessarily be Chaucer's own—sufficiently explains the medieval conception:—

> Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
> As olde bokes maken us memorie,
> Of him that stood in greet prosperitee
> And is y-fallen out of heigh degree
> Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

To Chaucer the interest lies in the study of normal men and women, and in comparing his narratives with their originals nothing is more striking than the air of homeliness and naturalness with which he contrives to invest the most amazing incidents. Dorigen and her husband strike one as simple, natural folk whose nice sense of honour leads them to keep their word though it were to their own hindrance. We hardly notice the absurdity of

the situation itself, and are little troubled by the magic arts which enable her persecutor to remove all rocks from the coast of Brittany. Constance is no tragedy-queen, but a true-hearted, simple woman; and the fact that she lives in a world of miracles never obtrudes itself. We accept her adventures without a qualm since our interest lies in her personality, and the odd thing is that her personality, attractive as it is, strikes one as so little out of the common. Writers of the day, as a rule, desired either to point a moral or to thrill their readers by sheer force of adventure. Chaucer took the accepted conventions of his day, and pierced through them to the human nature underneath.

CHAPTER IV

CHAUCER'S CHARACTER-DRAWING

LIKE every other young poet Chaucer had to learn his trade, and in nothing is the development of his genius more clearly to be traced than in his treatment of character. The *Book of the Duchesse* gives us a sort of map of the character of the good fair White: in his choice of qualities and method of expression Chaucer shows both observation and originality, but the plan of the poem precludes anything in the nature of dramatic self-revelation, and the whole description of Blanche is from the outside. The *Parlement of Foules* and the *Hous of Fame* afford little scope for character-drawing, and though something more might be expected of the *Legend of Good Women*, as we have seen, the moral purpose which inspires it leads to perfunctory and undramatic treatment of the legends.

One only of Chaucer's earlier poems shows the true bent of his genius. The rough

sketches which he afterwards worked up and used in the *Canterbury Tales* had given some evidence of his keen interest in human nature, but not until we come to *Troilus and Criseyde* do we find him giving full rein to his invention. The earlier part of Book I, which describes how Troilus first catches sight of Cressida in the temple and at once falls in love with her, is taken almost literally from Boccaccio, but the entrance of Pandarus strikes a new note. Troilus lies languishing in his chamber in the most approved manner, when Pandarus comes in and hearing him asks what is the matter :—

> Han now thus sone Grekes maad yow lene ?[1]
> Or hastow som remors of conscience,
> And art now falle in som devocioun . . . ?

Troilus replies that he is the " refus of every creature," and that love has overcome him and brought him to despair. Pandarus heaves a sigh of relief and says if that is all he will soon put matters right, for though he knows nothing of such foolishness himself, he can easily arrange the affair :—

> A whetston is no kerving instrument,
> And yet it maketh sharpe kerving-tolis.[2]

[1] Have the Greeks thus soon made you thin ?
[2] Carving-tools.

Troilus still refuses to be comforted and only casts up his eyes and sighs, whereupon Pandarus grows annoyed as well as anxious :—

And cryde "a-wake" ful wonderly and sharpe;
What? slombrestow as in a lytargye?[1]
Or artow lyk an asse to the harpe,
That hereth soun, when men the strenges plye,
But in his minde of that no melodye
May sinken, him to glade, for that he
So dul is of his bestialitee?

Having at last succeeded in rousing the disconsolate lover and inducing him once more to take his part in the life of court and camp, Pandarus hurries off to interview his niece, whom he finds sitting with her maidens "with-inne a paved parlour" reading the geste of Thebes. The contrast between the shrewd, elderly man of the world and the love-sick youth has been admirably brought out in Book I; in Book II a different, but no less striking contrast is shown between the coarse humour and practical wisdom of the uncle and the daintiness and charm of the niece. Pandarus angles for Cressida and plays her as a skilful fisherman plays a trout. It is obvious that he regards the whole thing

[1] Slumberest thou as if in a lethargy.

as a good-natured grown-up regards a children's game. It is deadly earnest to them, and since they take it so seriously he will do his best to help them, but all the while he considers it a piece of pretty and amusing childishness, though he takes pleasure in playing it adroitly. His idea of effective appeal is to poke his niece "ever newe and newe" and his jests when he has succeeded in bringing the lovers together savour more of the camp than the court. When the tragedy occurs and Troilus and Cressida are parted for ever, Pandarus has no better comfort to offer than the platitude :—

That alwey freendes may nought been y-fere,[1]

and he evidently thinks that Troilus is making a most unnecessary fuss about it, though he is so sincerely distressed at Cressida's treachery that he offers—lightly enough—to "hate hir evermore" :—

If I dide ought that mighte lyken thee,
It is me leef; [2] and of this treson now,
God woot, that it a sorwe is un-to me!
And dredeless, for hertes ese of yow,[3]
Right fayn wolde I amende it, wiste I how

[1] Friends cannot always be together.
[2] I am glad (lit. it is dear to me).
[3] And without doubt, to ease your heart.

And fro this world, almighty god I preye
Delivere hir sone; I can no-more seye.

At the same time he is a person of some energy and force. When Troilus rushes about his chamber beating his head against the wall,

And of his deeth roreth in compleyninge,

Pandarus shows some impatience of such weakness and bids him pull himself together and

. . . manly set the world on sixe and sevene;
And if thou deye a martir, go to hevene.

Excellently sound advice.

Nowhere is attention ostentatiously called to him; we are never allowed to feel that he is being dragged in by way of comic relief; but his mere presence at once removes *Troilus and Criseyde* from the category of conventional love-romances, and the very fact that we are left to discover his significance for ourselves, without comment or explanation shows Chaucer's confidence in his craftmanship.

But skilfully as Pandarus is drawn, the character of Cressida shows even greater subtlety of treatment. To the medieval mind faithlessness in love was the one un-

forgivable crime. Nearly a hundred years after Chaucer wrote his *Troilus and Criseyde*, Sir Thomas Malory tells us of Guenever, "she was a good lover and therefore she made a good end," and again and again in the medieval romances proper we find the same thought insisted on. Chaucer had therefore no light task before him when he set out to draw a heroine at once lovable and fickle, and to enlist the sympathies of his readers on behalf of one whose name had become a by-word for faithlessness in love. With consummate skill he insists from the outset on her gentleness and timidity. When Pandarus declares that the deaths both of Troilus and himself will lie at her door if she turns a deaf ear to his pleading, Cressida is simple enough to believe that he means it, and

> . . . wel neigh starf for fere,[1]
> So as she was the ferfulleste wight[2]
> That might be. . . .

That she is no vulgar coquette is shown by her ignorance of Troilus's passion. Apparently he spends his whole time in the temple gazing at her, but there is no mistaking the sincerity of her unselfconsciousness and

[1] almost died for fear. [2] the most timid person.

surprise when Pandarus tells her of her lover's plight. Nor is she at first altogether pleased at having one of the handsomest and bravest of Priam's sons at her feet; indeed Chaucer is at some pains to explain that she does not suffer herself to be lightly won :—

> For I sey nought that she so sodeynly
> Yaf him hir love, but that she gan enclyne
> To lyk him first, and I have told you why;
> And after that, his manhood and his pyne[1]
> Made love with-inne hir for to myne,[2]
> For which, by process and by good servyse
> He gat hir love, and in no sodyn wyse.

Altogether we get the impression of a simple, child-like being who wanders happily about her garden with Flexippe and Tharbe and Antigone "and othere of hir wommen," or sits poring over tales of chivalry, without a thought of marriage. She is woman enough to feel the force of Pandarus's hint that it is folly to live

> . . . . alle proude
> Til crowes feet be growe under your yë,

and to like the thought that the hero who rides blushing through the cheering crowd

> . . . . . is he
> Which that myn uncle swereth he most be deed
> But I on him have mercy and pitee,

[1] pain. [2] mine.

but she is no Delilah spreading her snares for men. Her uncle, the only person whom she has to advise her, urges her to listen to Troilus; the prince himself has everything likely to attract a girl's fancy; and as she sagely remarks :—

I knowe also, and alday here and see
Men loven wommen al this toun aboute;
Be they the wers ? why nay, with-outen doubte.

No wonder she finally yields to her lover's passionate wooing when Pandarus tricks her into coming to see him :—

" But nathelees, this warne I yow," quod she,
" A kinges sone although ye be, y-wis,
Ye shul na-more have soverainetee
Of me in love, than right that cas is;
Ne I nil forbere, if that ye doon a-mis,
To wrathen [1] yow; and whyl that ye me serve
Cherycen [2] yow right after ye deserve.

And shortly, dere herte and al my knight,
Beth glad, and draweth yow to lustinisse,
And I shal trewely, with al my might,
Your bittre tornen al into swetnesse;
If I be she that may yow do gladnesse,
For every wo ye shal recovre a blisse;
And him in armes took, and gan him kisse."

There is no prettier confession of love in all literature. Then follows their brief period

[1] be wroth with. [2] cherish.

of rapture, with its mock quarrels and speedy reconciliations, before the dreadful day when Calkas sends for his daughter. The news that Cressida is to be delivered up to the Greeks fills the lovers with despair. Troilus flings himself on his bed railing against Fortune and abusing Calkas as an

. . . olde unholsom and mislyved man :

Cressida with tears prepares for her journey. One of the most delightful pictures in the whole story is that of the worthy women who came to bid her farewell and take her tears as a delicate compliment to themselves :—

And thilke foles sittinge hir aboute
Wenden that she wepte and syked [1] sore
By-cause that she sholde out of that route
Depart, and never pleye with hem more.
And they that hadde y-knowen hir of yore
Seye hir so wepe, and thoughte it kindenesse,
And eche of hem wepte eek for hir distresse.

Her sorrow is sincere, and her tears do not cease to flow when Troilus is out of sight. Shakespeare's Cressid, whose one idea is to ingratiate herself with her new friends, is a very different person from Chaucer's woe-begone heroine. And yet in her very sorrow we see her weakness. When Pandarus first

[1] sighed.

tried to move her pity she had yielded, not solely out of compassion but also because she was afraid of what might be said of her if any harm came to Troilus :—

And if this man slee here himself, allas !
In my presence, it wol be no solas.
What men wolde of hit deme I can nat seye :
It nedeth me ful sleyly for to pley.[1]

The same strain of selfishness manifests itself now. Cressida is incapable of being swept away by a great passion. She has a cat-like softness and daintiness and charm, a cat's readiness to attach herself to the person she is with at the moment, and a cat's adaptability to circumstances. She is genuinely distressed at being parted from Troilus, she cries till her eyes have dark rings round them, and even Pandarus is moved at the sight, but she is incapable of exposing herself to any danger or inconvenience for her lover's sake. Like the lady in the *Statue and the Bust* she hesitates at the thought of difficulty :—

" And if that I me putte in jupartye [2]
To stele awey by nighte, and it befalle
That I be caught, I shal be holde a spye,
Or elles, lo, this drede I most of alle
If in the hondes of som wrecche I falle,

[1] *i. e.* I must act cautiously. [2] jeopardy.

I am but lost, al be myn herte trewe;
Now mighty god, thou on my sorwe rewe!
. . . . .
But natheles, bityde what bityde,
I shal to-morwe at night, by est or weste,
Out of the ost stele on som maner syde,
And go with Troilus wher-as him leste.
This purpos wol I holde, and this is beste.
No fors of wikked tonges janglerye,[1]
For ever on love han wrecches had envye.

To such souls to-morrow never comes, and it is no surprise to find her before long yielding to Diomede's entreaties, as she had formerly yielded to those of Troilus. Boccaccio's heroine at once makes up her mind to flee from the Greek camp, and then is quickly turned from her "high and great intent" by the advent of a new lover. Chaucer with far greater sublety prepares us for the change, and makes her very weakness her excuse :—

But trewely, the story telleth us,
Ther made never womman more wo
Than she, whan that she falsed Troilus.

The reason for this excess of sorrow is characteristic :—

She seyde, "Allas! for now is clene a-go
My name of trouthe in love for ever-mo
. . .

[1] No matter for the jangling of wicked tongues.

Allas, of me unto the worldes ende
Shal neither been y-written nor y-songe
No good word, for thise bokes wol me shende,[1]
O, rolled shal I ben on many a tonge," [2]

and equally characteristic her hasty excuse,

"Al be I not the firste that dide amis,"

and the sublime self-confidence with which in the act of jilting one lover she announces her unalterable fidelity to the next :—

"And sin I see there is no bettre way,
And that to late is now for me to rewe,
To Diomede algate I wol be trewe."

The whole character is drawn with extraordinary delicacy and insight, and with a tenderness which marks Chaucer's large-hearted tolerance. It is comparatively easy for an author to hold up a character to execration, but only the very greatest can show us the weaknesses of human nature without for one moment becoming cynical or contemptuous.

In the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer's method of character delineation is more concise. In *Troilus and Criseyde* he has five books, containing over 8000 lines, at his disposal,

[1] blame. [2] *i. e.* my name will be in everyone's mouth.

and the raptures and anguish of the lovers are described at considerable length. In the *Canterbury Tales* he has a far more complex task before him; he has to present the pilgrims themselves, in the various prologues and end-links; to make each tale a dramatic revelation of the character of the teller; and to exhibit the characters of the personages who play a part in the various stories. The 560 lines of the *Prologue* in themselves contain a far greater number and variety of characters than are to be found in the whole of *Troilus and Criseyde*, and if there is less subtlety of treatment the later prologues and end-links soon atone for this. Nothing, for instance, would have been easier than to draw a conventional picture of the self-indulgent, pleasure-loving monk, and at first sight we might think that Chaucer had done little more, though even in the *Prologue* we are conscious of a sharp distinction between the Monk, who with all his faults is a gentleman, and such vulgar impostors as the Pardoner and the Somnour. But further acquaintance soon rectifies this conception. Self-indulgent and pleasure-loving the Monk undoubtedly is, but he is no hypocrite or evil-liver. The Host makes one of his few mistakes in tact by treating

him with breezy familiarity, "Ryd forth," he cries :—

Ryd forth, myn owne lord, brek nat our game,
But, by my trouthe, I knowe nat your name,
Wher shal I calle you my lord dan John,
Or dan Thomas, or elles dan Albon?
Of what hous be ye, by your fader kin?
I vow to god, thou hast a ful fair skin,
It is a gentil pasture ther thou goost;
Thou art nat lyk a penaunt[1] or a goost.

The Monk knows better than to rebuke the somewhat coarse pleasantries that follow; but with quiet dignity he ignores the familiarity and offers to relate either the life of St. Edward or else a series of tragedies :—

Of whiche I have an hundred in my celle.

The choice of subjects in itself constitutes a delicate but unmistakable snub. The Host expected some tale of hunting and merriment from him—tragedy has little in common with his stout, jovial person, and frank delight in good living—instead of which the pilgrims are regaled with a series of moral discourses which would have been perfectly in place in the cloister, but seem strangely ill-suited to the present company. Indeed, the pilgrims grow restive under so much good advice;

[1] penitent.

they evidently fear that the worthy Monk means to inflict the whole hundred tragedies on them, and after listening, with growing impatience, to seventeen tales of woe, the tender-hearted Knight can bear no more :—

" Ho ! " quod the knight, " good sir, na-more of this.
That ye han seyd is right y-nough, y-wis,
And mochel more; for litel hevinesse
Is right y-nough to mochel folk, I gesse.
I seye for me it is a greet disese
Wher-as men han ben in greet welthe and ese
To heren of hir sodyn fal, allas ! "

But it is significant that it is the Knight and not the Host who breaks in, and that it is not until the Knight has spoken that Harry Bailly informs the narrator of the obvious fact that his tale " anoyeth al this companye," and courteously begs him to " sey somwhat of hunting." The Monk refuses, and the turn passes to the Nun's Priest, but never again does the Host venture to take a liberty with " dan Piers."

The Host's character is drawn with extraordinary skill, and without the aid of any such introductory description as the *Prologue* gives us of the other pilgrims. The knowledge of human nature is part of his trade, and the

success with which he manages the diverse company which chance has thrown in his way is proof enough that he is passed-master of his profession. Shrewd, worldly, and unimaginative, we should imagine that the coarser tales best please his taste, but it is his business to cater for people of all kinds, and he well understands how to ensure sufficient variety to suit all listeners. His rough good-humoured air of authority is sufficient to keep the Friar and the Somnour within bounds. He prevents the drunken Cook from becoming an intolerable nuisance to the company. He keeps an eye on every individual pilgrim, and sees that no one is overlooked. His ready jests smooth over many little roughnesses and disagreeables, and the one thing that really takes him aback is when the poor parson rebukes him for the constant oaths which slip off his tongue so readily. He can only conclude that a person so extraordinary must be a Lollard. And all the time that he is keeping the pilgrims in a good temper and preventing them from feeling the journey irksome, he has by no means lost sight of the fact that the reward of the best story is to be "a soper at our aller cost," given at the Tabard Inn. The money he

expended on the pilgrimage was probably a good investment—not to mention the chance that his expenses might very possibly be reduced to nothing, since at the very beginning he had established it as a law that:—

> . . . who-so wol my judgement withseye
> Shal paye al that we spenden by the weye

A very practical person, Harry Bailly!

Chaucer excels in drawing characters of this type. His young men are not unlike the heroes of Shakespearean comedy. They are real enough, but they have no very marked individuality. The Squire is by far the best of them. In him we see the charm and freshness of youth, and it would be ungracious to ask more of so fair a promise. But Troilus, with his tearfulness and emotionalism, his readiness to procrastinate and to look to others to help him out of his difficulties, with something of Bassanio's gallantry and attractiveness, has also Bassanio's pliability. His is too slight a nature to form the centre of a tragedy. Palamon and Arcite are as indistinguishable as Demetrius and Lysander. There are critics who profess to see subtle differences of character between them, but to the majority of readers they are mere types

of chivalry. Dorigen's husband, Averagus, is little more than an embodiment of loyal truth, and Griselda's, were one to regard him as anything but the means of testing wifely patience, would be a monster of cruelty. Compare with these, the Pardoner, the Friar, the Somnour, the Canon's Yeoman, the Miller, and all the other commonplace, practical men whom Chaucer describes. Most of them strike us as elderly; certainly none of them have any of the freshness or idealism of youth. The remarkable thing about them is that they are so ordinary and yet so interesting. The fussy self-importance of Chauntecleer; the garrulous vulgarity of Pandarus; the senile uxoriousness of January, are all drawn to the life, without one touch of bitterness or exaggeration. We listen to the jests and squabbles of the pilgrims on the road to Canterbury, or the story of some drama of everyday life, and we feel as if we had been made free of the ale-house and were listening to the village gossips of our own day.

But if the best drawn of Chaucer's men are confined to one comparatively narrow class, his women show no such limitation. He draws no great tragedy-queen, no Guenever or Vittoria Corrombona, but with this great

exception he depicts women of almost every type. Before going on to discuss his heroines in detail, however, it might, perhaps, be well to say a few words as to Chaucer's attitude towards women in general.

It must be evident even to the most superficial observer, that Chaucer had an innate reverence for womanhood. The cult of the Virgin Mary, which had done so much to exalt woman among all Christian nations, appealed to him strongly, and, as we have seen, he more than once goes out of his way to introduce some invocation to the "flour of virgines alle." His love of children no doubt inclined him to look with tenderness on the relation of mother and child, and among his most beautiful pictures are those of Constance, with her baby in her arms, and Griselda bidding farewell to her "litel yonge mayde":—

And in her barm [1] this litel child she leyde
With ful sad face, and gan the child to kisse
And lulled it, and after gan it blisse.[2]

But he was far too shrewd and honest an observer of life to persuade himself that all women were angels, or to allow reverence

[1] lap. [2] bless.

to degenerate into sentimentality. His attitude towards marriage is characteristic. Reference has already been made to his acceptance of the comic convention of the shrewish wife, and certainly both the Host and the Merchant have but few illusions left concerning wives. The virago whom the Host has married cannot as much as go to say her prayers without finding some cause of quarrel :—

And if that any neighebour of myne
Wol nat in chirche to my wyf enclyne,[1]
Or be so hardy to hir to trespace,
Whan she comth hoom, she rampeth in my face,
And cryeth, "false coward, wreek[2] thy wyf!";

The Merchant's wife would "overmatch the devil himself" were he foolish enough to wed her. In the Lenvoy to the *Clerkes Tale* Chaucer warns modern husbands to look for no patient Griseldas among their wives, and gives much satiric advice to "archewyves" to stand no nonsense from their husbands. In the *Lenvoy a Bukton* he warns his friend of "the sorwe and wo that is in mariage" :—

I wol nat seyn how that it is the cheyne[3]
Of Sathanas, on which he gnaweth ever,
But I dar seyn, were he out of his peyne,
As by his wille, he wolde be bounne never.

[1] do reverence, bow. [2] wreak, avenge. [3] chain

A fair proportion of the *Canterbury Tales* deal with the tricks by which a faithless wife imposes on her too credulous husband, and the bitterest of all the words which Chaucer utters on the subject are those which preface the *Marchantes Tale* of January and May, when with biting sarcasm he rebukes Theophrastus for daring to say that a good servant is of more value than a wife, and goes on to discuss at length the happiness of wedded life :—

How mighte a man han any adversitee
That hath a wyf? certes I can nat seye.
The blisse which that is bitwixe hem tweye
Ther may no tonge telle, or herte thinke.
If he be poore, she helpeth him to swinke; [1]
She kepeth his good, and wasteth never a deel;
Al that her housbonde lust,[2] hir lyketh weel; [3]

before relating the shame which a young wife brings upon her doting old husband. The Shipmann protests with brutal frankness that wives cost more than they are worth, and tells a tale to prove it. From all this we might imagine Chaucer a cross-grained misogynist, but a glance for one moment at the other side of the picture corrects this impression. He is as ready to say what will

[1] toil. [2] desires. [3] seems good to her.

amuse his contemporaries as Shakespeare is to tickle the ears of the groundlings in his generation, but, like Shakespeare, he is too just to see anything from only one point of view. There certainly are women who abuse their husbands, and Chaucer's inferiority to Shakespeare is marked by the fact that he finds the situation amusing; and there are also shrews and termagants who make their husbands' lives a burden in other ways. But pecking is not confined to hens. Chaucer realises that for woman marriage is even more of a lottery than for man, since she is necessarily so much at her husband's mercy :—

Lo, how a woman doth amis,
To love him that unknowen is!
For, by Crist, lo! thus it fareth;
"Hit is not al gold that glareth."[1]
For, al-so brouke I wel myn heed,[2]
Ther may be under goodliheed
Kevered many a shrewd vyce;
Therefore be no wight so nyce
To take a love only for chere,
For speche, or for frendly manere;
For this shal every woman finde
That som man, of his pure kinde,[3]
Wol shewen outward the faireste,
Til he have caught that what him leste;

[1] glitters. [2] *i. e.* as my brains tell me.
[3] simply by nature.

And thanne wol he causes finde,
And swere how that she is unkinde,
Or fals, or prevy, or double was.
(*Hous of Fame*, Bk. I, ll. 269–85.)

Husband-hunting is a sport which has roused the laughter of men from time immemorial; Chaucer is one of the few who has ever portrayed that fierce shrinking from the thought of matrimony which is no less common among women. Emily longing to be free to roam in the forest and "noght to been a wyf," and Constance trembling at the thought of the strange man into whose hands she is being committed, are as true to life as the Wife of Bath with her husbands five at the Church door. And this poet, who sees so clearly the dangers and evils of matrimony, has left us one of the most perfect pictures of married life at its best. Dorigen and Averagus understand how to remain lovers all their lives :—

Heer may men seen an humble wys accord;
Thus hath she take hir servant and hir lord,
Servant in love, and lord in mariage;
Then was he bothe in lordship and servage;
Servage? nay, but in lordshipe above
Sith he hath bothe his lady and his love;
His lady, certes, and his wyf also,
The whiche that lawe of love acordeth to.
(*Frankeleyns Tale*, ll. 63–70.)

The passage immediately preceding this, with its beautiful picture of what love understands by freedom, is too long to quote in full, but it shows clearly enough Chaucer's conception of the relation of the sexes. To talk of mastery is absurd :—

Whan maistrie comth, the god of love anon
Beteth his winges, and farewel ! he is gon !

True love learns to give and take and does not demand payment for every wrong :—

Ire, siknesse, or constellacioun,[1]
Wyn, wo, or chaunginge of complexioun [2]
Causeth ful ofte to doon amis or speken.
On every wrong a man may nat be wreken. . .

and the great lesson of married life is patience and tender forbearance in such moments of weakness. The story illustrates the text. Averagus has no word of reproach for his wife when she tells him what she has done, and Dorigen, on her part, shows a simple confidence in her husband's honour which almost makes us forget the impossible absurdity of the situation. After all, it is in Chaucer's women themselves, rather than in what he says about woman, that we see his attitude most clearly. In the character of Blanche

[1] *i. e.* an unpropitious conjunction of planets.
[2] *i. e.* change of disposition.

the Duchesse he portrays an ideal which differs in many ways from the conventional standard of the day. Instead of the typical heroine of romance, whose sole thought is of love and whose sole desire that her knight may prove the bravest in Christendom, Chaucer draws a lively, quick-witted girl, whose consciousness of her own power and simple delight in her own beauty never degenerate into selfish coquetry. The medieval heroine considered it a point of honour to set her lover impossible tasks to perform for her sake. Blanche "ne used no such knakkes small." She sees no sense in sending a man

> . . . . into Walayke,[1]
> To Pruyse and in-to Tartarye,
> To Alisaundre, ne in-to Turkye,
> And bidde him faste, annoo that he
> Go hoodles to the drye see[2]
> And come hoom by the Carrenare;[3]

and telling him to be

> . . . . right ware
> That I may of yow here seyn[4]
> Worship, or that ye come ageyn.

[1] Wallacia.

[2] Possibly this refers to the sea of sand and pebbles mentioned by Sir John Mandeville in his *Travels*. To go bareheaded was considered a great hardship.

[3] Probably the dangerous gulf of Quarnaro in the Adriatic.

[4] hear tell.

Nor does she use any arts to enhance her beauty. She looks you straight in the face with those great grey eyes of hers :—

> Debonair, goode, gladde, and sadde,

and offers a frank friendship to all "gode folk." She utters no half truths, and takes no pleasure in deceit, nor was there ever

> . . . through hir tonge
> Man ne woman greatly harmed.

There is no touch of pettiness in her nature. One of the most delightful passages in the poem is that in which the Black Knight declares how ready she always was to forgive and forget :—

> Whan I had wrong and she the right
> She wolde alwey so goodely
> For-geve me so debonairly.
> In alle my youthe in alle chaunce
> She took me in hir governaunce.

At the same time she "loved so wel hir owne name" that she suffered no liberties to be taken with her :—

> She wrong do wolde to no wight;

and

> No wight might do her no shame.

Through the whole picture there breathes a

spirit of vigour and freshness and gaiety. Once again Chaucer seems to foreshadow Shakespeare: Blanche might well take her place beside Rosalind and Portia and Beatrice, as a type of simple unspoiled girlhood. Her frank enjoyment of life, her keen wit, which knows no touch of malice, her combination of tender-heartedness and strength remind us more than once of Shakespeare's heroines, and like them she is no colourless model of propriety, but has all a true woman's charm and unexpectedness.

No other of Chaucer's portraits is so detailed, but he recurs more than once to the same type. Emily is drawn with comparatively few strokes, but she gives us very much the same impression as Blanche. There is the same sense of the open air, the same simplicity and directness. Nothing better brings out the peculiar quality of Chaucer's heroine than a comparison between the Emily of the *Knightes Tale* and the Emily of *Two Noble Kinsmen*. The one walks alone in the garden, gathering flowers, and singing to herself for sheer lightness of heart. The other converses with her waiting-woman, and her chief interest in nature lies in the hope that the maid may prove able "to work such flowers in silk." There is no reason

why the second Emily should not wish to have an embroidered gown, but its introduction here at once destroys the freshness and simplicity of the picture. Canace, too, delights in wandering in the forest in the early morning. She is so closely in sympathy with nature that it seems but natural that she should understand bird-latin, and her quick sympathy with the unhappy falcon is very characteristic of a Chaucerian heroine, for again and again he tells us

That pitee renneth sone in gentil heart.

It is a pretty picture which shows the king's daughter gently bandaging the wounded bird upon her lap, or doing "hir bisiness and al hir might" to gather herbs for salves.

Constance, Griselda, Dorigen are maturer and more developed. They are women, not girls, and women who have lived and suffered, but they are just what we should expect Blanche, or Emily, or Canace to develop into. They have less gaiety and light-heartedness, ess pretty wilfulness than these younger sisters of theirs, but they have the same frankness and directness, the same honesty of mind. They meet their fate with grave serenity and simple courage. Griselda aban-

dons herself to what she believes to be her duty. Constance and Dorigen when confronted by danger show perfect readiness to do what in them lies to defend their own honour. Constance throws the wicked steward into the sea; Dorigen, instead of indulging in hysterics, is quick-witted enough to hit on a way of escape which no natural means could have blocked. Through all three stories runs a vein of tenderness which stirs our sympathy. Griselda, who has borne so much in patience, gives vent to one passionate cry of reproach when she is bidden to make way for the new wife, a cry which has in it all a woman's fond clinging to the memory of a past happiness:—

> O gode god! how gentil and how kinde
> Ye semed by your speche and your visage
> The day that maked was our mariage;

and surely no direct accusation of cruelty could show with equal clearness how deeply she has suffered. They are great-hearted women, before whose innate nobility the persecutions and unjust accusations to which they are subjected drop into nothingness.

When Chaucer deliberately sets out to draw a saint instead of a woman, he is less successful. Our sympathies are with Blanche, as she sings and dances so gaily, rather than with the

preternaturally pious Virginia, who at the age of twelve often feigns sickness in order to

> . . . fleen the companye
> Wher lykly was to treten of folye,[1]
> As is at festes, revels, and at daunces. . .

Indeed the whole of the *Phisiciens Tale* seems curiously cold and lifeless. There is a touch of nature at the end where the child, forgetting her piety, flings her arms round her father's neck, and asks if there is no remedy, and again where she begs him to smite softly, but these are not enough to atone for the perfunctoriness of the rest. The story is too essentially tragic for the barest narration of it not to make some appeal to us, but it is impossible not to feel that Chaucer was either hurried or working against the grain when he wrote his version.

The *Seconde Nonnes Tale* contains even less of human interest. Cecilia is neither more nor less than the mouthpiece of the Christian religion, and the miracles that she works and the sermons that she preaches leave the reader unmoved. The music of the verse has a charm of its own, and Chaucer's most left-handed work is yet the work of a genius, but a comparison of Cecilia with Constance soon

[1] Where there was likely to be foolish behaviour.

shows the difference between a real woman and an embodied ideal. The miraculous element, which is subordinated to the human interest in the *Man of Lawes Tale*, dominates the whole of the *Seconde Nonnes Tale*, and the inevitable sameness of the various conversions further detracts from its vividness.

In Cressida Chaucer had painted a woman of the butterfly type. In the *Canterbury Tales* he gives us a certain number of actually immoral women, such as Alisoun and May, but he paints no second picture of pretty helpless coquettishness. The heroines of the less savoury tales are coarser in fibre and for the most part lower in the social scale than Calkas' daughter, and their stories are of mere sensuous self-indulgence with none of the charm and poetry which marks the tale of Troilus and Cressida. One character alone recalls Chaucer's earlier heroine. The Prioress is very much what a fourteenth-century Cressida would have been if her friends had placed her in a convent instead of finding her a husband. She has the same daintiness and trimness, the same superficial tender-heartedness. It is difficult to imagine that her sympathy, like Canace's, would take the practical form of applying salves or binding up wounds, but :—

She was so charitable and so pitous,
She wolde wepe if that she sawe a mous
Caught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.

Her table manners are excellent, and she wears her veil with an air :—

Ful semely hir wimpel pinched was.

Her silver brooch, with its *Amor vincit omnia*, betrays a naïve interest in her personal appearance. She is never brought into contact with the more passionate side of life as Cressida is, and her seclusion from the world has given her a touch of primness which combines oddly with her little affectations. The contrast between her worldliness and that of the Monk is complete. He is gross, jovial, self-indulgent; she is delicate, mincing, conventional. Like Cressida she would always follow the line of least resistance, though it would cause her genuine—if but momentary—distress to give pain to anyone. She is too well-bred ever to think for herself, and too innocent and simple-minded not to accept life as it is offered her. She tells her story with real tenderness and feeling, and it is evident that the atmosphere of the cloister in no wise irks her. It is impossible to regard her as a pattern nun, but equally impossible

to judge her harshly. Both she and Cressida have something childlike about them, and it seems out of place to try them by the ordinary standards.

Of a very different type are Chaucer's practical, bustling housewives, amongst whom the Wife of Bath and Dame Pertelote stand pre-eminent. The Wife of Bath is a capable, active, pushing woman, with plenty of courage and plenty of self-confidence. She is well-to-do and has a fitting sense of her own dignity and importance, but she has no idea of letting dignity stand in the way of enjoyment, and is quite ready to take her part in the rough jests of the company. Comely of face and plump of person, she dresses well and is quite prepared to make the most of her attractions. The prologue to her tale shows that she has plenty of shrewd mother-wit. Her view of matrimony is characteristic. She recognises the "greet perfeccioun" of celibacy, but since all men and women are not suited to such a life, she is impatient of the idea that they should marry but once, and she quotes the Scriptures most aptly for her purpose. Her present husband is her fifth, and when he dies she has every intention of marrying again :—

"I nil envye no virginitee;"
she cries,

"Let hem be breed of pured whete-seed,
And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed,"[1]

for barley-bread is by no means to be despised. In fact she is the epitome of common-sense, and her confidence in her own opinion enables her to bear contradiction good-humouredly enough. Her methods with her various husbands were simple: three she bullied and brow-beat, one she paid back in his own coin. The fifth, who had the sense to beat her, was the only one for whom she had any respect, and even he had finally yielded her

. . . the governance of hous and lond
And of his tonge and of his hond also.

It is the picture of a violent, coarse—but not wholly ill-natured—woman, who despises bookishness and thoroughly enjoys good ale and good company. She has no morals and no ideals, though she loves to go

To vigiles and to processiouns,
To preching eek, and to thise pilgrimages,
To pleyes of miracles and mariages,

but her genial good-fellowship makes her a pleasant enough companion.

[1] Let them be bread of pure wheat-flour,
And let us wives be called barley-bread.

Dame Pertelote is drawn with even greater skill. The impatience with which she listens to Chauntecleer's account of his dream is just what we should expect of a sensible, unimaginative, middle-class woman, whose own nerves and digestion were in excellent order, if her husband came to her with a long story of a supernatural warning. Dreams, she says, are the natural consequence of overeating; the best thing he can do is to take some of the herbs she recommends, and when he has pecked these up, " right as they growe " and " ete hem in " he will find all his nervousness and depression disappear. Chauntecleer is furious at being treated with such scant respect and proceeds to overwhelm her with examples of dreams that have come true. His wise wife, who knows when to hold her tongue, makes no attempt to answer him back, but is evidently only too thankful when at last, being convinced that he has established his point, he suffers his attention to be distracted and turns to the pleasanter business of love-making. Pertelote is in fact typical of the good wives of her class, as the Wife of Bath is of the bad. She is no more a heroine than the Wife of Bath is a villainess, but the one studies her husband's comforts and thoroughly

understands how to make him happy, while the other cares for nothing but her own amusement. Pertelote's lamentations when Chauntecleer is borne off are in the best taste. Restraint was considered no virtue in a medieval widow, and Pertelote very properly screams loudly and persistently. Nor does wifely affection go unrewarded. The "sely widwe" and her daughters who own the hen-yard

> Herden thise hennes cry and maken wo,
> And out at dores steten they anoon,

with the result that Chauntecleer is saved.

It is this power of making characters at once typical and individual which marks true dramatic genius. Browning's men and women reveal their innermost souls to us, we see them with a passionate vividness which is almost startling in its brilliancy, but all the while we are conscious of the intensity of their individuality. The conspicuous thing about them is that which marks them out from the rest of the world. The commonplace novelist or dramatist, on the other hand, gives us mere types of vice and virtue. Mr. Jerome's gallery of Stageland characters—the hero, the heroine, the comic Irishman, the good old

man, and the rest—is scarcely caricature. It is hardly necessary to give them names, the same types have been recurring again and again for many a long year, and are likely to continue to recur as long as there are cheap books and cheap theatres. But the great masters of character-drawing contrive to show us the individual at once as a unit and as part of the whole. We see the peculiar idiosyncrasies of this or that person, and we are conscious, not only of a subtle bond between ourselves and them which enables us to see things from their point of view, but of their relation to human nature in general and to their own class in particular.

CHAPTER V

CHAUCER'S HUMOUR

CRITICS may be divided in opinion as to Chaucer's right to be called the Father of English poetry, but there can be no question that he is the first great English humorist. As far back as Henry III's reign fabliaux had been imported from France, but they took no real root in English soil, and though their coarse jests and indecent situations were fully appreciated by thirteenth- and fourteenth-century readers, they never rose above the level of collections of "merrie tales" and made no pretensions to originality or literary style. The same stories were repeated again and again, with slight variations, and are often to be found in Indian or Arabian versions as well as in French and English. Chaucer alone, showed that it was possible to see in them a revelation of human nature. The romances, as has been said, were far more French than English, and, even so, comparatively few of them show any flicker of humour. *Aucassin and Nicolette* stands

out as a conspicuous exception, but this is pure French, and the more English romances, such as *Guy of Warwick* or *Bevis of Hampton*, take everything with intense seriousness. It is true that the Continental animal epic had begun to make its influence felt in England, but it was still the Continental epic: it belonged to the days of literary free-trade before the national spirit made itself felt in literature. Satire, it is true, had long since made its appearance in England, but except for rude popular rhymes and an occasional poem of greater pretensions — such as the *Land of Cokaygne*—it was in Latin, and had nothing distinctively English about it. In the Miracle Plays, it is true, we find that mixture of shrewd common-sense and real feeling, of comedy and tragedy, which we are accustomed to regard as characteristically English, but though they had been popular in England for many years before Chaucer began to write, the best of them date from the fifteenth century, and the comic element in the earlier plays seems chiefly to have consisted in rough-and-tumble farce. It was left for Chaucer to show the true meaning and value of the comic point of view, and at the same time to embody the characteristics

of a nation which had but recently awakened to the consciousness of its own individuality.

To say that humour is the most subtle and illusive of qualities, is to utter a truism. Certain situations are in themselves necessarily and essentially tragic. The slaying of parent by child, or child by parent; a great shipwreck involving terrible loss of life; any sudden and overwhelming catastrophe. must always bring with it a sense of horror. But comedy depends on point of view rather than on situation. An absurdity of dress or manner which would cause us to smile under normal circumstances, would cease to be amusing if it indicated dangerous insanity: a man falling off the roof of a house might go into the most ridiculous attitudes without in the least stirring the spectator's sense of humour. It is this which makes it difficult to accept Professor Bergson's most interesting and suggestive theory of the mechanical nature of comedy as wholly satisfactory. And again, while such tragic incidents as have been suggested appeal to every normal human being, what amuses one person may leave another absolutely untouched. We all know the blank sensation of having our best story received with stony politeness, and the

despair of trying to explain a joke. Certain things, however, do appeal in greater or less degree to the majority of people, and among these is the element of unexpectedness. The whole point of the modern musical comedy consists in making the actor behave as no sane person ever dreamed of behaving in actual life. If it were the fashion to enter a room in a series of cart-wheels we should see nothing funny in it. The audience roars with laughter when the elderly gentleman sits on his hat, because hats are not intended to be used as cushions. Nor is this element of unexpectedness confined to mere farce. It constitutes more than half the point of a brilliant repartee or play upon words. The child's misuse of terms is amusing because it suggests something which would never have occurred to us. And it is this which underlies the assertion that humour consists in incongruity. True humour, however, contains far more than this. If comedy plays on the surface of life, its greatest exponents bring home to us the fact that that surface covers a depth. It is no accident that causes Shakespeare's comedies to deepen in tone until they become well-nigh indistinguishable from tragedies, or that leads

Chaucer to introduce a Pandarus into the tragedy of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Comedy has a double value. It is amusing, and it is also a bond which connects us with everyday life. It keeps tragedy from soaring into worlds peopled exclusively by heroes and heroines of almost superhuman greatness, and romance from dwelling wholly in a land of faery. Had the poets of the Restoration ever dared to view their heroes from the comic point of view we should have been spared the bombastic grandiloquence of their Almanzors and Osmyns. Had Rosalind no sense of humour, were Touchstone and Jaques non-existent, *As You Like It* might still be a charming forest idyll, but it would cease to have any hint of realism.

Chaucer's comedy touches both extremes: it includes the most elementary, and the most subtle forms, and though he never rises to the height of the great Shakespearean dramas, he does reveal possibilities hitherto undreamed of in English literature. For the sake of clearness it may be well to consider his comedy under four heads: farce, wit, satire, humour proper.

(1) *Farce.*—Farce may be defined as that form of comedy which makes least appeal to

the intelligence, which is, in fact, almost wholly physical. An imbecile may be incapable of realising that there is anything unusual in wearing straws in one's hair and therefore may not find the spectacle amusing, but it needs but a very low order of intelligence to appreciate such physical peculiarity—hence the popularity of costume songs, and pantomime generally, which call for no mental effort on the part of the audience. But while farce is undoubtedly the lowest form of comedy, it does not necessarily follow that it is to be despised. The greatest authors do not disdain to make use of it, only they keep it subordinate to other interests. Shakespeare contrives to blend farce with character-study in a way that is truly marvellous. Falstaff's fatness is eminently farcical, and yet it is something more—a starveling Sir John would be a wholly different person. It is farce touched with humour. Dogberry and Verges are of a different species from the comic policeman of musical comedy.

In Chaucer we find both forms of farce. The "sely carpenter" of the *Milleres Tale* provides plenty of incident well suited to tickle the most elementary sense of the comic. The picture of the unfortunate John victual-

ling his tub in readiness for a second edition of Noah's flood, and sitting in it, slung up to the ceiling, "awaytinge on the reyn," is irresistibly funny, and it is easy to fancy the delight of the audience when, thinking the flood has come, he cuts the cord and comes bumping on to the floor; for the truest farce of all is the practical joke which makes someone else ridiculous. All the coarser tales are full of such episodes. It would make no difference if the incidents were transferred from one tale to another, they have no subtle connection with the personality of those involved in them; the absurdity lies in the actual situation, and is exactly on a level with the rough-and-tumble fights between Noah and his wife, which proved so popular in the Miracle Plays, or the tossing of Mak in a blanket in the well-known Townley Mystery.

The portrait of the drunken Cook contains farce of a somewhat higher order. He is a most unattractive person, and from any other point of view would be merely repulsive. But humour, while it cuts through false sentiment, not infrequently softens down the harsher lines in a character. There is no bitterness in true laughter; we cannot wholly despise what amuses us. In a tract the

Cook and the Wife of Bath, the Friar and the Pardoner, would serve as awful warnings. In the *Canterbury Tales* they show an extraordinary power of disarming criticism and worming themselves into our affections:—

The Cook of London, whyl the Reve spak,
For joye, him thoughte, he clawed him on the bak.

He is a genial rascal after all, and we almost resent his having so unfortunately appropriate a name as Hogge. When he falls asleep as he rides and rolls off his horse our sympathies are with him, though we fully appreciate the force of the Maunciple's plea that he shall not be permitted to tell his tale. The picture of the rest of the pilgrims shoving him to and fro in their efforts to mount him again, is farce of the simplest and most primitive kind, but Roger himself is a live man, not a mere occasion of mirth in others.

The Wyf of Bath, again, is a foul-mouthed, coarse-grained woman, selfish and self-indulgent. Her prologue shows an amazing ignorance of the meaning of clean living, and her piety merely serves as an excuse for seeing the world. Yet such is the power of the comic point of view that it is quite impossible to judge her from the conventional moral

standpoint. Comedy lays stress on her good-humour and her sense, and, above all, on her power of amusing the company. Compare her for one moment with Mrs. Sinclair in *Clarissa*, or the old hag in *Dombey and Son*, and the effect produced by comic treatment at once becomes evident. It is not that it dulls our moral sense, but it gives us a peculiar tolerance of its own. Instead of judging all men from our own particular plane, we learn to see these illiterate and common folk as they see each other, and we find them extraordinarily human after all.

(2) *Wit.*—Wit is the intellectual counterpart of farce. Farce at its lowest is actually physical—the jester trips his victim up, 'Arry and 'Arriet exchange hats—and at its highest consists in physical absurdity. Wit appeals as much to a blind man as to one who can see. In neither case has the comic element any necessary connection with the characters of those concerned. Farce, as we have seen, may be combined with humour, and wit may gain an added keenness from our knowledge of the witty person, but in their simplest form neither depends on any such connection. A man chasing his hat is a funny sight, quite apart from our having

any idea of who he is. Any additional element of humour which may be added by the fact that it is Mr. So-and-so, who prides himself on his dignified deportment, is not purely farcical. In like manner, a brilliant repartee is amusing, though we may have no notion who uttered it: in fact, not infrequently the same story is told, with equal effect, about two or more different men. At the same time a remark, witty in itself, often gains additional force from its context, and in certain cases the chief point depends on the setting. The wit-traps so beloved by Restoration comedy writers, of which George Meredith speaks in his *Essay on Comedy*, are typical examples of pure wit. It does not matter in the least by whom the remark is made: the actual verbal sword-play is in itself amusing. Frequently such dialogue does nothing whatever to help on the plot. Its wit is in itself sufficient to justify its existence. Shakespeare, on the other hand, has extraordinarily few passages which can be detached from the play in which they occur, and quoted as essentially amusing. Falstaff's jests without Falstaff lose all their savour, and the wit of a Rosalind or a Beatrice is too intimate a part of her personality for

the two to be divorced. Millament's brilliant jests are scintillating jewels of wit. The wit of Shakespeare's heroines is a facet of their character.

Drama naturally affords more scope for the display of wit than does narrative poetry. That Chaucer is witty is undeniable, but his wit shows itself chiefly in sly comments and parentheses, or in the adroit use of an unexpected simile. His dry comment on the probable fate of Arcite's soul; the parenthesis which tells us how small is the number of those who having done well desire to hide their good deeds; the eagle's complaint, in the *Hous of Fame*, that the poet is "noyous for to carie"; Placebo's explanation of the reason why he has never yet quarrelled with any lord of "heigh estaat," are good examples of the former method. Detached from their context, there is little or nothing in any of them to raise a smile. They contain no play upon words, nothing intrinsically amusing. But in their proper setting they cause that pleasant shock which breeds laughter; they give a sudden whimsical turn to the thought.

The *Nonne Preestes Tale* illustrates, not only Chaucer's comic use of simile, but, what is closely allied to this, the comic effect pro-

duced by speaking of one thing in terms of another. The mock-heroic effect produced by the learning of Chauntecleer and the weight of the illustrations which he adduces in support of his faith in dreams, is inimitable. This cock quotes Josephus and Macrobius and Cato with such pompous gravity that he almost persuades us to share his own sense of his importance. The grave disquisition on predestination and free-will which prefaces the account of his untoward fate has an irresistibly comic effect. This is, however, not purely comic. It is characteristic of Chaucer that he should treat a matter which was evidently much in his thoughts, in this half-ironic manner. The comparison of the bereaved Pertelote to "Hasdrubales wyf," and her sister hens to the wives of the senators of Rome

—whan that Nero brende [1] the citee—

is no less effective. The whole story indeed is treated consistently from the comic point of view, and while here again there is nothing inherently funny in detached passages, wit lights up the poem from end to end.

(3) *Satire.*—Satire differs from farce or wit in that it has a definite moral purpose.

[1] burned.

> It is our purpose, Crites, to correct
> And punish with our laughter . . .

says Mercury in *Cynthia's Revels*. The satirist deliberately alienates our sympathies from those whom he describes, and as the true humorist is apt to pass from comedy to romance, and from romance to tragedy, so the satirist not infrequently ends by finding rage and disgust overpower his sense of the ridiculous. Ben Jonson passes from the comedy of *Every Man in his Humour* to the bitterness of *Volpone*, Swift from the comparative lightness of Gulliver in Lilliput, to the savage brutality of the Hounyhymns. Of satire pure and simple few examples are to be found in Chaucer. The *Hous of Fame* is indeed satiric in conception, and certain of the pictures it contains are decidedly effective. The fourteenth-century equivalent of the game of Russian Scandal which it describes, has already been noticed. No less ironic is the account of the

> shipmen and pilgrymes
> With scrippes bret-ful of lesinges
> Entremedled with tydinges,[1]

whom the poet meets in the house of Rumour.

[1] With scrips cramful of lies
Intermixed with news.

But the poem as a whole is so lengthy and so much of it is occupied with the description of symbols, references to classical mythology, and other equally serious matters, that the more witty portions stand out conspicuously, and the reader is apt to find some difficulty in seeing the various parts in their proper relation. Successful satire must ever keep its object in view. The *Hous of Fame* is too discursive to be really effective as a whole.

The fact is that satire is not Chaucer's natural bent. He is too quick-witted not to see through sham and humbug, but his interest lies in portraiture rather than in exposure. His object is to paint life as he sees it, to hold up the mirror to nature, and, as has justly been said, "a mirror has no tendency," it reflects, but it does not, or should not, distort. In two cases only does Chaucer deliberately draw a one-sided picture, and both are topical skits, too slight to regard as satire proper. The *Compleint of Mars*, which is not specially witty or amusing in itself, is said to have been written at the expense of my lady of York and the Earl of Huntingdon, but any savour which the jest may once have had, has long since passed away. The rhyme of *Sir Thopas* has already been noticed as a

good-natured parody of the conventional romance.

But if Chaucer is too tolerant and genial, too little of a preacher and enthusiast, for a satirist, enough has already been said to show that his wit has often a satiric turn. The student of the *Canterbury Tales* is often reminded of the worth of another great English humorist. Chaucer and Fielding are alike in a certain air of rollicking good-fellowship, a certain virility, a determination to paint men and women as they know them. Neither is particularly squeamish, both enjoy a rough jest, and have little patience with over-refinement. Both give one a sense of sturdy honesty and kindliness, and know how to combine tenderness with strength. Both, with all their tolerance, have a keen eye for hypocrisy or affectation and a sharp tongue wherewith to chastise and expose it. Chaucer hates no one, not even the Pardoner, as whole-heartedly as Fielding hates Master Blifil, but the *Pardoners Tale* affords the best instance of the satiric bent of the poet's humour when he is brought face to face with a scheming rogue.

The Host, who has been much moved by the piteous tale of Virginia, turns to the

Pardoner for something to remove its depressing influence:—

"Or but I here anon a mery tale."

he cries,

"Myn herte is lost for pitee of this mayde.
Thou belamy,[1] thou Pardoner," he seyde,
"Tel us som mirthe or japes[2] right anon."

The Pardoner is ready enough to oblige, as soon as he has called at the inn they are passing and has eaten and drunk. But it is noteworthy that the pilgrims, who have listened to the Miller's tale without a murmur, are nervous as to what the Pardoner's idea of a merry tale may be. With one voice they protest:—

"Nay! lat him telle us of no ribaudye;[3]
Tell us som moral thing, that we may lere[4]
Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly here."

To the Pardoner it is all one. Practised speaker as he is, a comic story or a sermon comes equally readily to his lips, and he promises with ready good-nature, though he begs for a moment for reflection:—

"I graunte, y-wis," quod he, "but I moste thinke
Up-on som honest thing, whyl that I drinke."

[1] *bel ami*, fair friend. [2] jests. [3] ribaldry. [4] learn.

Of their insinuations as to the kind of tale he is likely to tell if left to himself, he takes not the slightest notice. His tongue loosened by the ale, he begins with a cynical confession of his methods as a popular preacher.

"Lordings," quod he, "in chirches whan I preche
I peyne me to han an hauteyn [1] speche,
And ringe it out as round as gooth a belle,
For I can al by rote that I telle.[2]
My theme is alwey oon, and ever was—
'*Radix malorum est Cupiditas.*'"

Having thus warned his hearers against the love of money, he proceeds to show his credentials, sprinkling a few Latin terms here and there in his speech:—

"To saffron with my predicacioun [3]
And for to stire men to devocioun,"

and then shows his relics, the shoulder-bone of "an holy Jewes shepe," a miraculous mitten which will cause the crops of the man who wears it to increase manifold:—

"By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer,
An hundred mark sith I was Pardoner"—

a pillow-case, which he swears is our Lady's

[1] take trouble to speak loudly.
[2] *i. e.* I have all my sermon by heart.
[3] Wherewith to colour my sermon.

veil, etc., etc. After this he preaches a vehement sermon against avarice, the object of which, he frankly explains, is

> " . . . . . for to make hem free
> To yeve her pens, and namely unto me.
> For my entente is nat but for to winne,
> And no-thing for correccioun of sinne.
> I rekke never, whan that they ben beried,
> Though that her soules goon a-blakeberied." [1]

If anyone has offended him, he takes care so to point at him in what he says that the reference is unmistakable and the whole congregation understands who it is that is being denounced:—

> " Thus quyte I folk that doon us displeasances."

In fact, the whole object of his preaching is neither more nor less than the amassing of money:—

> " Therfore my theme is yet, and ever was—
> ' *Radix malorum est Cupiditas.*'
> . . . . . .
> For I wol preche and begge in sondry londes;
> I wol not do no labour with myn hondes
> . . . . . .
> I wol have money, wolle, chese, and whete,
> Al were it yeven of the poorest page,
> Or of the poorest widwe in a village."

[1] If their souls go blackberrying, *i. e.* I do not care where they go.

No wonder that

Up-on a day he gat him more moneye
Than that the person [1] gat in monthes tweye.

After this shameless confession, the Pardoner offers to relate one of the moral tales which he has found most efficacious in cajoling money out of unwilling pockets.

In Flaundres whylom was a companye
Of yonge folk, that haunteden folye [2] . . .

thus he begins, and so moved is he with the thought of the folly of these young people that, with his own lips scarce dry from their last draught of corny ale, he proceeds to denounce gluttony and drunkenness in no measured terms. It is an admirable sermon, full of apt illustrations and appropriate references to the Bible. It enables us to see, at the outset, how the preacher succeeds in dominating his illiterate audiences when he speaks in the village churches. Having got well into his stride, the Pardoner passes on to the promised tale. Among the riotous company are three young men. One day, as they sit drinking in a tavern, they hear the bell toll, and sending a servant to inquire the cause, they learn that Death has carried

[1] *i. e.* curate of the parish. [2] practised folly.

away one of their companions. With pot-valiant courage they declare their intention of seeking out and slaying this false traitor Death, and without more ado set forth on the quest. An old man, whom they meet by the way, tells them that Death is to be found in a neighbouring grove, under a tree:—

And everich of thise ryotoures ran
Til he cam to that tree, and ther they founde
Of florins fyne of golde y-coyned rounde
Wel ny an eighte busshels, as hem thoughte.

The sight effectually puts Death out of their minds. They decide that the treasure must be hidden, and since it will be well to wait for darkness before venturing to remove it, they draw lots to determine which of them shall run to the town for meat and drink, while the other two keep guard. The lot falls on the youngest, but no sooner has he gone than the two who remain plot to murder him when he comes back, since there will be the more gold for them if he is out of the way. The youngest also thinks it a pity to divide such wealth by three, and having reached the town he goes to an apothecary and demands

Som poyson, that he mighte his rattes quelle.[1]

He then buys three bottles, puts poison in two and reserves the third for his own use. On his return he is slain by the other two.

And whan that this was doon, thus spak that
oon,
"Now lat us sitte and drinke, and make us merie
And afterward we wol his body berie."

Thus all three find Death where they sought him.

The story is told with considerable force. The action moves quickly, and there is enough grim suggestiveness to stir the hearer's imagination without the detail being in any way overloaded. The picture of the old man vainly seeking death as he strikes his staff upon the ground and cries: "Leve moder, leet me in"; the brief dialogue between the two roisterers in the wood; the description of the thoughts that chase each other through the mind of the third as he runs, all show a power of vivid dramatic presentation. It is not in the least such a tale as the pilgrims expect from the Pardoner. The poor Parson himself could point no better moral. And it ends with (of all things!) an impassioned appeal against

[1] kill.

avarice. The Pardoner has fallen unconsciously into his professional manner. Carried away by his own eloquence, he forgets that he began by explaining the trick of the whole thing. No doubt, as he himself had said, he has used the tale often enough as a means of extorting money, and with the most convincing fervour he begs the pilgrims—with his confession fresh in their minds—to beware of covetousness, and to press forward and make their offerings to his holy relics. So naturally have we been led on step by step, so easily has he passed from cynicism to sermon, and from sermon to application, that it is something of a shock when the Host, instead of hastening to kiss the relics as he is bidden, responds to the invitation with a coarse jest. The anger of the Pardoner at this indignity is explicable only on the ground that he was so consummate an actor that he had literally forgotten himself in his part. A hypocrite he undoubtedly is, but not the crude, deliberate hypocrite whom the later satirists of the Puritans delighted to draw, nor even the Pecksniffian hypocrite who, while he retains his mask, even in private, never loses consciousness of the fact that it is a mask; he has something of the artistic

temperament, and his failure to impress the pilgrims gives him a real, though momentary, jar. The subtle irony with which the whole picture is drawn is perfect in its restraint. The vulgar rogue is sufficiently represented by the Friar. The Pardoner is of higher intelligence, and while we condemn him we recognise his ability.

The suggestion that the various birds in the *Parlement of Foules* represent courtiers of the day, has already been noticed. If it is true, the satire is of so genial and playful a kind that even the goose can scarcely have been hurt by it. More than once Chaucer draws an amusing picture of a gossiping, foolish crowd, but while it is evident that he has no very high opinion of the intelligence of people in the mass, there is no trace of bitterness in his descriptions. The well-meaning busybodies who come to comfort Criseyde are as helplessly incompetent as "the goos, the cokkow, and the doke," but though fussy and self-centred, they have too much real kindliness for it to be possible not to feel a certain affection for them. Perhaps the best of all Chaucer's crowds is that in the *Squieres Tale* which gathers to look at the horse of brass, and the other magic gifts:—

Diverse folk diversely they demed;
As many hedes, as many wittes ther been.
They murmureden as dooth a swarm of been,[1]
And maden skiles after hir fantasyes,[2]
Rehersinge of thise olde poetryes,
And seyden, it was lyk the Pegasee,
The hors that hadde winges for to flee;
Or elles it was the Grekes hors Synon,[3]
That broghte Troye to destruccion,
As men may in thise olde gestes rede.
"Myn herte," quod oon, "is evermore in drede;
I trowe som men of armes been ther-inne,
That shapen[4] hem this citee for to winne.
It were right good that al swich thing were knowe."
Another rowned[5] to his felawe lowe,
And seyde, "He lyeth, it is rather lyk
An apparance y-maad by som magyk
As jogelours pleyen at thise festes grete."
Of sondry doutes thus they jangle and trete,
As lewed[6] peple demeth comunly
Of thinges that been maad more subtilly,
Than they can in her lewedness comprehende:
They demen gladly to the badder ende.

With equal learning they discuss the mirror and sword and ring, and having paraded their knowledge of "sondry harding of metal," "fern-asshen glass" and similar wonderful inventions, come to no conclusion.

[1] bees. [2] And made guesses according to their fancy.
[3] The horse of Sinon the Greek. [4] plot.
[5] whispered. [6] ignorant.

(4) *Humour.*—If it is difficult to draw a hard-and-fast line round other elements of comedy, and detach wit from satire, or satire from farce, it is still harder to attempt to isolate humour and discuss it as a separate and distinct property. Humour is the sympathetic appreciation of the comic, the faculty which enables us to love while we laugh, and to love the better for our laughter. Something has already been said of the softening influence of comedy. It is humour which enables us to see the other person's point of view, to distinguish between crimes and misdemeanours, so that we no more wish to convert Sir Toby from the error of his ways than to reduce the fat boy's appetite. Above all, it is humour which points out those endearing peculiarities, those little foibles and harmless weaknesses which give Parson Adams and the Vicar of Wakefield so warm a place in our affections. There is no sting in such laughter, no conscious superiority; on the contrary, it contains an element of tenderness. Obviously humour is distinct from satire, but it can be distinguished from farce and wit only by insisting on the externals when speaking of them. Humour is indeed the soul of all comedy. Satire, being

destructive, not constructive, is in a class apart, but even satire—as we have seen in Chaucer's picture of a crowd—may become so softened by humour that it loses the element of caricature and serves only to give a keener edge to wit.

Chaucer's whole point of view is that of the humorist. To the tragic writer things apparently trifling in themselves may be fraught with deep significance. A chance movement, a momentary impulse, may set fire to the train which brings about the catastrophe, or may reveal some subtle shade of character which it is essential that we should see. But the tragedian has no time to waste on trifles for their own sake. If Shakespeare shows us the sleepy porter unbarring the gate of Macbeth's castle, or the grave-diggers of Elsinore singing at their work, it is not because he wants our thoughts to dwell on either the one or the other. They have their place as part of the tragedy, and it is the sense of tragedy, not the triviality of the incident which is uppermost in our mind. But the comic poet saunters gaily through life pausing to notice every trifle as he passes. He views the world as the unaccustomed traveller views a foreign country; the old women at

their cottage doors, the peasants plodding behind their patient oxen in the field, the very names above the shops, all are interesting. There is no such thing as a dull person, the mere fashion in which a man walks or wears his clothes is worth recording, not because it throws any subtle light upon his character, but because it is unusual and therefore quaint, because, in fact, the unexpected is manifesting itself in these homely details.

Chaucer possesses this faculty of amused observation in a pre-eminent degree. Again and again he contrives to invest some perfectly trifling and commonplace incident with an air of whimsicality, and by so doing to make it at once realistic and remote. We are never wholly absorbed by what amuses us, in the sense that we are absorbed by what appeals to our tragic emotions. Laughter implies a certain detachment, whereas in tragedy we feel with those concerned with an intensity which often causes us to lose all consciousness of our own individuality. We may be surprised to find the tears in our eyes, but we are always conscious of our laughter.

This homely, whimsical point of view shows itself in a thousand minute touches. Friar

John, in the *Somnours Tale*, goes to call on friend Thomas:—

And fro the bench he droof awey the cat,
And leyde adoun his potente[1] and his hat,
And eek his scrippe, and sette him softe adoun. . . .

The rout pursues dan Russel the fox:—

And cryden, "Out! harrow! and weylawey!
Ha, ha, the fox!" and after him they ran,
And eek with staves many another man;
Ran Colle our dogge, and Talbot, and Gerland,
And Malkin, with a distaf in her hand;
Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges
So were they fered for berking of the dogges
And shouting of the men and wimmen eek,
They ronne so, hem thoughte hir herte brekke.
They yelleden as feendes doon in hellë;
The dokes[2] cryden as men wolde hem quelle;[3]
The gees for fere flowen[4] over the trees;
Out of the hyve cam the swarm of bees. . . .

There is nothing wildly farcical in any of this. Friar John does not sit on the cat; the men and dogs do not tumble over each other. The humour consists in the point of view which finds such incidents worth recording. It is not what he says, but the way

[1] staff. [2] ducks. [3] kill. [4] flew.

he says it; not what he sees, but the way he sees it.

As to the sympathetic quality of humour, that is even more obvious in all Chaucer's work. It is sympathy that lies at the bottom of a tolerance so wide that it hardly finds it necessary to forgive. When Chaucer needs a melodramatic villain or villainess such as Apius, or Alle's mother, he can depict one, but except when it affords opportunity for comedy he usually touches an evil character but lightly. His heart lies in the pure poetry of such women as Constance and Dorigen, or in broadly comic effect: he has no desire to sound the depths of human nature or to dwell upon the darker and more terrible side of life. Shakespeare's comedy is often touched with a suggestion of something faintly tragic. Even Falstaff is by no means a wholly comic figure, and the wisdom of Jaques, with all its affectation, contains a truth that goes beneath the surface. Chaucer seldom shows us the revealing power of comedy, but, like Shakespeare, he is not afraid to blend gaiety and gravity in the same person. From one point of view the *Book of the Duchesse* is surely the most cheerful elegy ever written. Chaucer does not tell off certain low-class

characters for comic effect, he allows even the noblest and best a sense of humour. When we think of the serious and lachrymose heroines of romance, we feel that Chaucer's women owe half their vitality to the fact that they are not afraid to laugh, that noble and high-minded as they are, they are part and parcel of the ordinary stuff of human life.

CHAPTER VI

CHAUCER'S DESCRIPTIVE POWER

From the earliest days of pre-Conquest literature, English poetry has always shown a strong feeling for nature. Nature, in those early days, has something wild and terrible about her; great forests, haunted by savage beasts and more savage men, stretch over the land; the sea-birds utter their plaintive cries as they hover above the desolate salt-marshes; ice-cold waves break on the iron-bound coast. Yet the sons of the sea-kings feel the call of the sea in their blood. They know the danger and the savagery of nature, but something in them responds to her relentless force, and the spell of the sea holds them. They may picture Heaven as a place where there is neither hail nor frost, and look forward to still waters and green pastures hereafter, but on earth the welter of the waves, and the strange calm of the rime-bound trees, draw them in spite of themselves. In the charms and riddles a gentler note is sometimes sounded as the poet watches a cloud of gnats "float

o'er the forest heights," or listens to the whirr of the wild-swan's wings; but on the whole the impression left upon our minds is one of force rather than of peace, of man putting forth his might to subdue the wild strength of nature, and winning a bride by capture.

Often their descriptions of warfare gain an added force from the skilful use of some natural detail. The wan raven circles above the conflicting hosts, waiting for his prey; the water-snakes curve and curl in the seething waters into which Beowulf plunges to meet the monster. Here again, we have the same mingling of tragic imagination and fierce exultation.

They delight in picturing actual battle, in describing the hiss of the javelins through the air, and the gleam of the flashing blade. But whil they often speak of the beauty of curiously wrought armour, or of the wealth of a king's treasure, they show little power of presenting beauty for its own sake, and none at all of depicting the beauty of a woman. Their heroines are fair and gracious and bear the mead cup round the hall where the warriors feast, and unless they are in some way concerned with causing or avenging a quarrel, that is all there is to say about them.

To the Anglo-Normans this wilder and sterner aspect of nature seems to have made little appeal. Nature forms a charming background to many of the love-lyrics of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but it is a far daintier and sunnier nature than that of the Old English poets. The time has come of the singing of birds:—

> Groweth sed, and bloweth med,
> And springth the wude nu—
> Sing cuccu![1]

In the romances certain definite conventions gradually establish themselves. It is always May morning when the hero rides into the green forest, and flowers, of uncertain species but gay colours, flaunt about his path. A description of a hunt, including minute details as to the proper method of dismembering the quarry, often finds a place—Tristram first wins King Mark's affections by teaching his huntsmen the proper method of cutting up a stag. Detailed descriptions of elaborate banquets are also popular, but it is evident in these, as in the descriptions of hunting,

[1] Groweth seed and bloweth mead
And springeth the wood now—
Sing cuckoo.

that the author's interest lies rather in the actual etiquette than in any pictorial effect. Nevertheless, the romances show a growing delight in colour and beauty. The hero and heroine must conform to a certain conventional standard, but the standard is by no means contemptible.

"Fair was he and slim and tall" (so we read of Aucassin in Mr. Bourdillon's translation) and well fashioned in legs and feet and body "and arms. His hair was yellow and crisped small; and his eyes were grey and laughing; and his face was clear and shapely; and his nose high and well-set; and so endued was he with good condition, that there was none bad in him, but good only."

And the fact that the gardens in which these gracious beings wander conform to no natural laws, does not prevent them from having a charm of their own. What could be more dainty than the following picture of a dutiful daughter reading to her parents (from the *Chevalier au Lion* by Chrétien de Troyes):—

Thrugh the hall sir Gawain gase [1]
Intil an orchard, playn pase; [2]
His maiden with him ledes he:
He fand a knyght under a tree,

[1] goes. [2] steady pace.

Opon a cloth of gold he lay;
Before him sat a ful fayr may;[1]
A lady sat with them in fere[2]
The maiden read, that they myght here
A real romance in that place . . .

Only occasionally do we hear any echo of that deeper note which sounded through the older poets, and catch a glimpse of winter, when

The leaves lancen from the lynde[3] and light(en) on the ground,

and

Unblithe on bare twigs sings many a bird
Piteously piping for pain of the cold.

(*Sir Gawayn and the Green Knight.*)

The battles and tournaments, accounts of which fill so many pages of the romances, for the most part show considerable sameness of treatment. The hero is beaten to his knees by the giant, or is almost overpowered by the poisonous breath of the dragon, when with a supreme effort he recovers himself and pierces his adversary in whatever his one vital spot may happen to be. Now and then some flash of ingenuity lights up the story, as when the Soldan's daughter saves Roland and

[1] maid. [2] together.
[3] fall quickly from the linden tree.

Oliver and their companions by flinging her father's plate to the besieging army, thus at once distracting the attention of the soldiers and making her avaricious father ready to consent to any compromise; or some touch of real feeling breaks through all conventions, as when Sir Tristram, as he turns to meet Marhaus, kicks away his boat, since but one of them will need any means of leaving the isle; but for the most part the author follows the regular lines.

Chaucer, while he shows definite traces of the conventions of his day, in description, as in other matters, follows his own bent. Description for its own sake has little interest for him. Again and again he cuts short some passage which his contemporaries would have elaborated. In the *Squieres Tale*, for instance, a banquet occurs which affords admirable opportunity for that detailed account of ceremonial so dear to the hearts of medieval poets. Chaucer tells us that the steward ordered spices and wine, and then adds impatiently :—

> What nedeth yow rehercen hir array ?[1]
> Ech man wot wel, that at a kinges feeste
> Hath plentee, to the moste and to the leeste,
> And deyntees mo than been in my knowing.

[1] What need is there to tell of their array ?

The dinner given by Deiphebus in *Troilus and Criseyde* is passed over equally perfunctorily:—

> Come eek Criseyde, al innocent of this,
> Antigone, hir sister Tarbe also;
> But flee we now prolixitee best is,
> For love of god, and lat us faste go
> Right to the effect, with oute tales mo,
> Why al this folk assembled in this place;
> And lat us of hir saluinges pace.[1]

Even the hunt in the *Book of the Duchesse* is dismissed in little over a dozen lines:—

> Whan we came to the forest-syde
> Every man dide, right anoon,
> As to hunting fil to doon.[2]
> The mayster-hunte anoon, fot-hoot,[3]
> With a gret horne blew three moot[4]
> At the uncoupling of his houndes.
> Within a whyl the hert [y]-founde is,
> Y-halowed and rechased faste
> Longe tyme; and at the laste
> This hert rused[5] and stal away
> Fro alle the houndes a prevy way . . .

And then the poet turns to the real subject of his poem. Wordsworth himself does not make hunting seem a tamer occupation.

Nor are Chaucer's descriptions of fighting

[1] *i. e.* Let us pay no attention to their greetings.
[2] fell to hunting.
[3] hot-foot.
[4] notes on the horn.
[5] roused itself.

much more convincing. He tells us coldly that Troilus and Diomede met in battle:—

With blody strokes and with wordes grete,

and that Troilus often beat furiously upon the helmet of Diomede, but the stanza which follows this announcement puts the matter in a nutshell:—

And if I hadde y-taken for to wryte
The armes of this ilk worthy mane,
Than wolde I of his batailles endyte.
But for that I to wryte first began
Of his love, I have seyd as that I can.
His worthy dedes, who-so list hem here,
Reed Dares, he can telle hem alle y-fere.[1]

It is emotion, not action, which interests him most. In the *Knightes Tale*, Palamon and Arcite

—foynen[2] ech at other wonder longe,

but Chaucer has no desire to follow the duel to its end. He remarks that they hew at each other till they are ankle deep in blood and then leaves them, still fighting, while he turns to Theseus. There is more vigour in the description of the tournament at the end. Here the clash of arms does echo through the verse, and the rapid narrative

[1] together. [2] thrust.

conveys a vivid sense of the heat and clamour of battle:—

> Ther stomblen stedes stronge, and doun goth all.
> He rolleth under foot as dooth a bal.
> He foyneth on his feet with his tronchoun,
> And he him hurtleth with his hors adoun . . .

Possibly the poet was recalling his own fighting days in France. Certainly there is nothing stiff or conventional about this. But nowhere else does he give so lengthy and detailed a description of action, and even here it has a dramatic value, apart from its intrinsic interest, in that it enhances the suspense. Further, Chaucer, as we know, had himself probably superintended the erection of such lists, and the ceremonial of the tournament may well have had a special interest for him. His use of similes in describing action is worthy of note. He does not, like Spenser, constantly break the narrative by introducing some beautiful picture drawn from classical mythology, thus carrying the thoughts of the reader away from the actual situation at the moment. His similes are few—in this connection—and are so chosen that they add to the vividness of the whole impression. Palamon and Arcite fight like wild boars

That frothen whyte as foom for ire wood.

Of Arcite we are told,

There nas no tygre in the vale of Galgopheye,
Whan that hir whelp is stole, whan it is lyte,
So cruel on the hunte, as is Arcite.

Such comparisons are very different from Spenser's:—

Like as the sacred Oxe that carelesse stands
With gilden hornes and flowry girlands crownd
Proud of his dying honor and deare bandes,
While th' altars fume with frankincense arownd,
All suddeinly, with mortal stroke astownd,
Doth groveling fall, and with his streaming gore
Distaines the pillours and the holy grownd,
And the faire flowres that decked him afore:
So fell proud Marinell upon the pretious shore.

To Chaucer the interest does not lie in the pomp and pageantry, nor even in the chivalry of it all, but in the human emotion, in Emily waiting to know which of the lovers will claim her hand, in the knights filled with the lust of battle, in the quondam friends who seek each other's life. Chivalry has, indeed, little glamour in Chaucer's eyes. Gower's story of Florent has a certain stateliness which is lacking in the *Tale of the Wyf of Bathe*. It has none of Chaucer's digressions, none of the homeliness of his version. A

description of the elf-queen and her jolly company dancing in the green meadows would perhaps be out of place in the mouth of the Wife of Bath, but it is evident that Chaucer sacrifices the dainty grace of Mab and Puck without a pang in order to allow himself a sly hit at the " limitours and othere holy freres " who have replaced them.

The same principle underlies his description of people. In the *Book of the Duchesse* he gives us a detailed account of Blanche's charms; probably he felt it incumbent on him to do so. She is fair, as a heroine should be, but even in this, the most conventional of all his descriptions, he contrives to give life and individuality to the conventional type:—

For every heer [up]on hir hede,
Soth to seyn, hit was not rede,
Ne nouther yelw, ne broun hit nas;
Me thoughte most lyk gold hit was.
And whiche eyen my lady hadde!
Debonair, goode, glade, and sadde,[1]
Simple, of good mochel,[2] noght to wyde;
. . . . . .
And yet more-over, thogh alle tho
That ever lived were now a-lyve,
[They] ne sholde have founde to discryve
In al hir face a wikked signe;
For hit was sad, simple, and benigne.

[1] grave. [2] size.

This is no stereotyped model of feminine beauty, but a picture of the good fair White as she was when she lived.

In describing Cressida, Chaucer keeps fairly close to his original. We realise her beauty rather from the effect it produces on others than from any particular details. She is tall, but so well made that there is nothing clumsy or "manish" about her, and she dresses in black, as beseems a widow; this is practically all that we are told about her. The strong impression of sensuous beauty which she undoubtedly produces, is due to Chaucer's power of creating an atmosphere rather than to actual description. We hear the nightingale singing her to sleep, or watch her colour come and go as Troilus draws near, and our mind is so filled with an image of youth and beauty that we never stop to think if she is fair or dark. It is the same with Troilus. We get a gallant impression of him as he rides past Cressida's window, his eyes down-cast, and a boyish shyness tingeing his cheeks with red, but Chaucer thinks of his feelings rather than his looks. Later in the poem, as he rides towards the palace at the head of his men, the poet's impatience of mere description shows itself still more clearly :—

God woot if he sat on his hors a-right,
Or goodly was beseyn,[1] that ilke day!
God woot wher he was lyk a manly knight!
What sholde I dreeche[2] or telle of his array?
Criseyde, which that alle these thinges say,
To telle in short, hir lyked al y-fere
His personne, his array, his look, his chere . . .

Troilus's looks are, in fact, of importance only because they win the heart of Cressida.

But if Chaucer devotes little space to dilating upon mere beauty of person, he has a keen eye for anything in dress, manner, or appearance that is in the truest sense characteristic. The *Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* shows clearly enough how trifles may reflect personality. The grey fur that edges the Monk's sleeves, and the love-knot of gold that fastens his hood, tell their tale, and a single glance at him gives us considerable insight into his character:—

His heed was balled, that shoon as any glas,
And eek his face, as he had been anoint.
He was a lord ful fat and in good point;[3]
His eyen stepe,[4] and rollinge in his heed,
That stemed as a forncye of a leed;[5]
His botes souple, his hors in greet estat.[6]
Now certainly he was a fair prelat. . . .

[1] Or looked well. [2] Why should I be tedious.
[3] condition. [4] bright.
[5] That steamed like a furnace of lead. [6] condition.

The Christopher of silver that gleams on the Yeoman's green coat; the thread-bare raiment and lean horse of the Clerk of Oxenford; the ruddy face and white beard of the Franklin, all serve to illustrate the same point. The very spurs of the Wife of Bath seem to have a subtle significance of their own.

Once only does Chaucer go out of his way to give a detailed description of one of his heroines, and the passage is worth quoting in full because not only does it illustrate his careful observation of detail, but it shows also a dramatic fitness which is eminently characteristic. The Miller is describing Alisoun, and there is not a simile, among the many used, which would not spring naturally to the lips of a peasant:—

Fair was this yonge wyf, and ther-with-al
As any wesele hir body gent [1] and smal.
A ceynt [2] she werede barred al of silk,
A barmclooth [3] eek as whyt as morne milk
Up-on hir lendes, ful of many a gore.
Whyt was hir smok and brouded al bifore
And eek bihinde, on hir coler aboute,
Of col-blak silk, with-inne and eek with-oute.
The tapes of hir whyte voluper [4]
Were of the same suyte of hir coler; [5]

[1] slim. [2] girdle. [3] apron.
[4] strings of her white cap. [5] matched her collar.

Hir filet brood of silk, and set ful hye :
And sikerly she hadde a likerous ye.[1]
Ful smale y-pulled were hir browes two,[2]
And tho were bent, and blake as any sloo.[3]
She was ful more blisful on to see
Than is the newe pere-jonette[4] tree;
And softer than the wolle is of a wether.
And by hir girdel heeng a purs of lether
T'asseld with silk, and perled with latoun.[5]
In al this world, to seken up and doun,
Ther nis no man so wys, that coude thenche
So gay a popelote,[6] or swich a wenche.
Ful brighter was the shyning of hir hewe
Than in the tour the noble y-forged newe.
But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne[7]
As any swalwe sittinge on a berne.
Ther-to she coude skippe and make game,
As any kide or calf folwinge his dame.
Her mouth was swete as bragot[8] or the meeth,[9]
Or hord of apples leyd in hey or heeth.
Winsinge she was, as is a joly colt,
Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt.
A brooch she baar up-on hir lowe coler,
As brood as is the bos of a bocler.

The poet who wrote this had used his eyes to some purpose. In certain of his descriptions —notably that of Chauntecleer with his scarlet comb, black bill, azure legs, white nails, and

[1] enticing eye. [2] her eyebrows were fine.
[3] And they were arched, and black as any sloe.
[4] A kind of early pear. [5] studded with brass.
[6] puppet. [7] brisk. [8] a sweet drink. [9] mead.

golden tail—we notice Chaucer's love of brilliant colour, but this makes the comparative dullness and tameness of his marvellous palaces and enchanted castles all the more remarkable. He gives us a list of golden images, "riche tabernacles" and "curious portreytures" which stand in the Temple of Glass, but it is a mere auctioneer's catalogue of valuables which conveys no real impression of beauty or strangeness. We read of Venus "fletinge in a sec," her head crowned with roses,

And hir comb to kembe hir heed,

and feel as if we were looking up her attributes in a classical dictionary. The thrill of the Renaissance has not yet swept across Europe. The gods still sleep, before awakening to their strange sweet Indian summer of life. Classical mythology serves Chaucer as an additional storehouse of story and illustration, but it no more intoxicates him with rapture than does the *Gesta Romanorum*. Spenser's Temple of Venus, in which:—

An hundred altars round about were set,
All flaming with their sacrifices fire,
That with the steme thereof the Temple swet,
Which rould in clouds to heaven did aspire,
And in them bore true lovers vowes entire:

And eke an hundred brazen cauldrons bright
To bath in joy and amorous desire,
Every of which was to a damzell bright;
For all the Priests were damzells in soft linnen
dight . . .

glows with colour and warmth. Chaucer's perfunctory statement that the windows of his chamber were well glazed and unbroken,

That to beholde it were gret joye,

and that in the glazing was wrought

. . . al the storie of Troye,
. . . . . .
Of Ector and king Pirriamus,
Of Achilles and Lamedon,
Of Medea and of Jason,
Of Paris, Eleyne, and Lavyne . . .

leaves us untouched.

But if Chaucer is ill at ease within four walls, and takes but scant pleasure in looking at tapestries and pictures, the moment he slips out of doors he becomes a different being. He is no Wordsworth noting each twig and leaf, or watching with mystic gaze the shadows fall on the silent hills. He is content to fill his garden with flowers of the regulation

. . . whyte, blewe, yelowe, and rede;
And colde welle-stremes no-thing dede,
That swommen ful of smale fisshes lighte
With finnes rede and scales silver-brighte,

and it is probably just as well not to inquire too closely into the natural order of either blossoms or fish. Cressida's garden is distinguished by the neatness of its fences, and the fact that its paths have recently been gravelled and provided with nice new benches. But even in these trim and formal gardens the spirit of spring is abroad, and once in the wood, Chaucer abandons himself to the sheer joy of nature. He passes down a green glade

> Ful thikke of gras, ful softe and swete,
> With floures fele, faire under fete. . . .
> . . . . . .
> For it was, on to beholde
> As thogh the erthe envye wolde
> To be gayer than the heven
> To have mo floures, swiche seven
> As in the welken sterres be.[1]
> Hit had forgete the povertee
> That winter, through his colde morwes,
> Had mad hit suffre[n], and his sorwes;
> Al was forgeten, and that was sene.
> For al the wode was waxen grene.
> Swetnesse of dewe had mad it waxe . . .

and his heart keeps tune to the song of the birds. He has something of Milton's power of giving a general sense of freshness and

[1] To have more flowers than the seven stars in the sky.

sweetness, and, again like Milton, his scenery always strikes one as peculiarly English. He tells us that Cambinskan reigns in Syria, but his picture of the birds singing for joy of the lusty weather and the "yonge grene," is that of a Northern rather than an Eastern spring. His best-loved flower, the daisy, springs in every English hedgerow.

The description of May in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* is particularly charming. The poet declares that one thing, and one alone, has power to take him from his books. When May comes,

> Whan that I here the smale foules singe
> And that the floures ginne for to springe,
> Farwel my studie, as lasting that sesoun.

Instead of poring over some ponderous tome, he wanders out into the meadows to watch the daisy open to the sun:—

> And whan the sonne ginneth for to weste,
> Than closeth hit, and draweth hit to reste,
> So sore hit is afered of the night,
> Til on the morwe, that hit is dayës light.

All day long he roams till

> —closed was the flour and goon to reste,

and then he speeds swiftly home:—

And in a litel erber that I have,
Y-benched newe with turves fresshe y-grave,
I bad men shulde me my couche make;
For deyntee of the newe someres sake
I bad hem strowe floures on my bed.

But here again it is impression rather than actual description.

True to the city-bred instinct, Chaucer sees winter rather as the king of intimate delights and fire-side pleasures, than as having an especial beauty of his own. The *Frankeleyns Tale* contains a picture of December which brings the comfort of ingle-nook and steaming cup vividly before us:—

The bittre frostes, with the sleet and reyn,
Destroyed hath the grene in every yerd.
Janus sit by the fyr, with double berd,
And drinketh of his bugle-horn the wyn.
Before him stant braun of the tusked swyn,
And " Nowel " cryeth every lusty man.

We almost feel the pleasant glow of the fire, and hear the great logs hiss and crackle.

It is impossible to read Chaucer's descriptions of nature without being struck by his love of birds and animals, and especially of the smaller and more helpless kinds. Birds occupy a large place in his affections. He is perpetually pausing to call attention to them

and spring is to him pre-eminently the time when "smale fowles maken melodye." Here again he shows little minute observation or discrimination, it is birds in general, rather than any bird in particular, that he loves. To praise the song of a nightingale can hardly be reckoned any proof of special bird-lore, and except in the *Parlement of Foules*, Chaucer scarcely mentions any other bird by name. The crow, who is the real hero of the *Maunciples Tale*, and who distinguishes himself by singing, "cukkow! cukkow! cukkow!" can no more be regarded as an ordinary, unsophisticated bird than can the eagle who acts as Jove's messenger in the *Hous of Fame*, or the princess disguised as a falcon who seeks Canace's aid. The *Parlement of Foules*, it is true, shows that Chaucer knew the names of a considerable number of birds, but the epithets that he applies to each show no more real knowledge of their habits than the epithets which he (or rather, Boccaccio) applies to the various trees, in an earlier stanza, show any love of forestry. The oak is useful for building purposes, and the elm makes good coffins. In like manner, the owl forebodes death, and the swallow eats flies, or rather, if we are to believe Chaucer,

bees. Regarded as individuals, the birds are delightfully convincing: regarded as birds they are dismissed rather carelessly, though, since it is Chaucer who dismisses them, an occasional happy phrase redeems the passage from dullness and monotony.

But it is not only in a love of birds, which, after all, is common to most poets, that Chaucer shows this side of his nature. Reference has already been made to the whelp and the squirrels which he introduces into the *Book of the Duchesse*. The little coneys who hasten to their play in the garden of the *Parlement of Foules* are due in the first place to Boccaccio, but the Italian merely tells us that they "go hither and thither." His picture is dainty and pretty, but it lacks the half-amused tenderness of Chaucer's. Chaucer, it is evident, loves them all, bird and beast, sportive coney and timid roe, not forgetting the

Squerels, and bestes smale of gentil kinde.

The following stanza affords illustration of another point in Chaucer's descriptions. Master of melody as he is, he has not learned the subtle art of suiting sound to sense, and producing a definite sensuous impression by

sheer music. It is impossible to read of these

—instruments of strenges in acord

which make so ravishing a sweetness, without finding one's thoughts involuntarily carried on to Spenser's enchanted garden in which

Th' Angelicall soft trembling voyces made
To th' instruments divine respondence meet. . . .

Chaucer's little wind—" unethe it might be lesse "—which makes a soft noise in the green leaves, is too fresh ever to blow across the flowers of Acrasia's garden, but the Bower of Bliss casts a spell over us of which Chaucer has not the secret. He is too frankly of this world to be at home in fairy-land, and the note of sincerity which sounds throughout his verse would accord ill with such intoxicating sweetness. Lady Pride and her followers, Dame Cælia and her fair daughters, Fidelia, Speranza, and Carita, find a natural home in Spenser's world of wonders. But Chaucer's allegorical personages must needs either come to life and turn into actual human beings, like the birds in the *Parlement of Foules*, or remain stiff abstractions, like Plesaunce, and Delyt, and Gentilnesse, and the other symbolic inhabitants of the garden of the Rose.

CHAPTER VII

SOME VIEWS OF CHAUCER'S ON MEN AND THINGS

THE late fourteenth century was a time of social and political upheaval. The Church, over-rich and over-powerful for her own good, had become terribly corrupt. The fact that great offices of state were held by bishops meant, of necessity, that more and more of their purely ecclesiastical work was delegated to subordinates. In the ten years between 1376–86, out of twenty-five bishops no fewer than thirteen held secular offices of importance. William of Wykeham was appointed Chancellor of England and Bishop of the great diocese of Winchester in the same month. Spencer, Bishop of Norwich, led the English army in Flanders. No wonder that the power of the archdeacons, the *oculi episcopi*, increased tenfold. They frequently exercised authority in the bishop's court, and in those days the powers of ecclesiastical courts were considerable and their jurisdiction

was wide. The sketch which prefaces the *Freres Tale* was probably drawn from the life:—

> Whilom ther was dwellinge in my contree
> An erchedeken, a man of heigh degree
> . . . . . .
> For smale tythes and for smal offringe
> He made the peple pitously to singe.
> For er the bisshop caughte hem with his hook,
> They weren in the erchedekenes book.

Add to this the fact that one in three of the archdeacons holding office in England at this time were foreigners, and it is easy to see how much ill-feeling was likely to be stirred up between them and the laity. Nor were the parish priests much better. The black death, which ravaged Europe from time to time, had swept across England with peculiar fury in 1348. Hundreds of the noblest and best of the clergy, who stayed gallantly by their flocks, had been swept away. There were not enough priests to administer the sacraments of the Church, and between this urgent necessity for ministers to bury the dead, to baptise and marry, and the fact that many of the richer livings had fallen into the hands of foreigners, who cared nothing for the peasants

committed to their charge, or of the great Abbeys, which were ready enough to appoint some illiterate boor, just able to stumble through his office, to act as their deputy at a nominal salary, it is small wonder that crying abuses came into existence. "They have parish churches," writes Wycliff, "apropered to worldly rich bishops and abbots that have many thousand marks more than enow. . . . And yet they do not the office of curates, neither in teaching or preaching or giving of sacraments nor of receiving poor men in the parish: but setten an idiot for vicar or parish priest that cannot and may not do the office of a good curate, and yet the poor parish findeth him." Chaucer finds it among the striking virtues of his poor Parson that:—

He sette nat his benefice to hyre,
And leet his sheep encombred in the myre,
And ran to London, un-to seynt Poules
To seken him a chaunterie for soules,[1]
Or with a bretherhed to been withholde;
But dwelte at hoom, and kepte wel his folde. . . .

and that he does not attempt to wring their last penny from his unfortunate parishioners:—

[1] This refers to the common practice of paying a poor and often illiterate priest to take charge of a parish while the vicar went to London and earned a handsome and easy livelihood by saying masses for the repose of the souls of those who had left rich relatives.

Ful looth were him to cursen for his tythes.[1]

Matters were further complicated by the wandering friars who recognised no jurisdiction save that of the Pope himself, and who, having fallen far from the noble ideal of poverty, chastity, and obedience, set by their founders, took unscrupulous advantage of the ignorance and superstition of the people, and, like the pardoners, often undermined the authority of the parish priests. The custom of commuting penance for a payment in money was spreading, and naturally opened the door to abuses of all kinds.

No wonder that Wycliff arose to thunder against these malpractices, and that his poor preachers gained such a following. It was not, in the majority of cases, that people had any quarrel with the doctrines of the Church—the number of recantations and paucity of martyrs among the early Lollards show that it was not doctrine that they wished to reform—but injustice and oppression were inevitably arousing a widespread, smouldering discontent which broke into flame now at this point, now at that. As we read the history of the time, we marvel at the patience and

[1] He was loth to excommunicate those whose tithe was in arrears.

good-humour of the inhabitants of Merry England.

How far Chaucer was in sympathy with the Lollards it is difficult to say. His works contain but the barest reference to their existence, and the fact that the Host accuses the Parson of Lollardy, and that the Shipman expresses a pious horror of heresy, cannot be said to prove anything either way. It may be intended as a carefully concealed compliment to the influence of Wycliff, or, as seems more probable, it may simply be a chance reference in keeping with the spirit of the times. That the Shipman should be so terrified lest the saintly Parson should

> . . springen cokkel in our clene corn,[1]

that he feels impelled to break into his threatened sermon with the story of the merchant's wife and the monk, is a subtle enough piece of satire, but whether Chaucer so intended it, or whether it is one of the happy accidents of genius, we have no means of knowing. The Parson is a devout Catholic, the Monk, with all his faults, is at worst but a forerunner of the fox-hunting squarson of later days, with all the geniality and good-fellow-

[1] *i. e.* sow tares in our wheat.

ship of his race. If Chaucer attacks the clergy, it is only for those things which the best Churchmen of the day were denouncing with less wit but no less bitterness. Saints are rare at the best of times, and Chaucer, whose mission is to paint life as he finds it, gives good measure when he allows the Parson and the Plowman to form two of his nine-and-twenty pilgrims.

Few things, indeed, are more striking in Chaucer than the manner in which he combines caustic observation of the weaknesses and hypocrisies of men, with innate reverence for all that is pure and noble. That the same man should enjoy the coarse humour of the Friar and the Reve, and yet treat womanhood and childhood with such tender reverence, is one of the mysteries of human nature. Prof. Ten Brink, as has been said, believes that Chaucer passed through a phase of intense religious feeling. "A worldling has to reproach himself with all sorts of things," he writes, "especially when he lives at a court like that of Edward III and is intimate with a John of Gaunt. Chaucer . . . naturally seeks in religion the power for self-conquest and improvement. He was a faithful son of the Church, even though he had his own

opinions about many things. . . . He was specially attracted by the eternal-womanly element in this system, which finds its purest realisation in the person of the Virgin Mother Mary. In moments when life seemed hard and weary, and when he was unable to arouse and cheer himself with philosophy and poetry, he gladly turned for help and consolation to the Virgin Mother." Certainly his poetry is never sweeter or more dignified than when he is addressing this "haven of refut," this

. . . . . salvacioun
Of hem that been in sorwe and in distresse.

Nothing better illustrates the simplicity and sincerity of Chaucer's religious feeling, than the tale of little St. Hugh. The story of the Christian child decoyed away and murdered by the Jews was commonly believed in the Middle Ages. Indeed, it is said that more than one anti-Semitic outbreak in Russia during the past forty years has been provoked by the relation of similar tales, and we have just seen the conclusion of a "Blood-ritual" case of the kind. The fierce racial and religious hatred which underlies belief in the possibility of such a thing, is in itself sufficiently terrible, and the story affords

ample opportunity for the expression of animosity towards these

. . . cursed folk of Herodes al newe,

but Chaucer's religion would appear to consist less in the denunciation of the Church's enemies, than in affection for her saints. Dramatic justice is meted out to the murderers, but the poet takes no delight in dwelling on their dying agonies, or heaping abuse upon their memory. The point of the tale lies, not in the wickedness of the Jews, but in the simple, childish innocence and piety of Hugh, and the manner in which "Cristes moder" deigns to honour the service of this

. . . litel clergeon[1] of seven yeer of age.

The opening invocation is one of the most beautiful of all Chaucer's addresses to the Virgin:—

Lady! thy bountee, thy magnificence,
Thy vertu, and thy grete humilitee
Ther may no tonge expresse in no science;
For som-tyme, lady, er men praye to thee,
Thou goost biforn, of thy benignitee,
And getest us the light, thurgh thy preyers,
To gyden us un-to thy sone so dere.

From beginning to end the limpid simplicity

[1] chorister.

of the poem is marred by no unnecessary word. The picture of the little boy doing his diligence to learn the *Alma redemptoris*, although

> Noght wiste he what this Latin was to seye
> For he so yong and tendre was of age,

and going to his school-fellow to have it explained, is absolutely natural. So is the school-fellow's hasty summary of the hymn, ending with

> "I can no more expounde in this matere;
> I lerne song, I can [1] but smal grammere."

Chaucer does not, like so many hagiographers, forget the child in the saint. The prevailing note throughout is one of happy childhood. The tragedy is kept in the background. We catch a glimpse of the cruel steel as the Jews cut the boy's throat: we see the white-faced mother hastening from place to place in search of him; but our thoughts are with St. Hugh and the gracious Queen of Heaven who comes to aid him:—

> And in a tombe of marbul-stones clere
> Enclosen they his litel body swete;
> Ther he is now, god leve us for to mete.[2]

[1] know. [2] God grant that we may meet.

There is no tendency to over-elaborate the miracle or to explain it away. Chaucer accepts the fact quietly and without comment, as he accepts the miracles in the *Man of Lawes Tale*. In the story of Constance, indeed, it would seem as if some momentary doubt of its possibility flashed across his mind, for he goes out of his way to defend the miraculous element, but the defence itself is one of simple acceptance of facts related in the Bible, and shows none of that intellectual questioning which sometimes manifests itself in his poetry:—

Men mighte asken why she was nat slayn?
Eek at the feste who mighte hir body save?
And I answere to that demaunde agayn,
Who saved Daniel in the horrible cave,
Ther every wight save he, maister and knave
Was with the leoun fret er he asterte?[1]
No wight but god, that he bar in his herte.

. . . . .

Now, sith she was not at the feste y-slawe,[2]
Who kepte hir fro drenching[3] in the see?
Who kepte Jonas in the fisshes mawe
Til he was spouted up at Ninivee? . . .

. . . . .

It is obvious that Catholicism appeals to his

[1] Was eaten by the lion ere he could escape.
[2] slain. [3] drowning.

emotions, and that the shortcomings of unworthy priests no more affect his pleasure in the tender beauty of its point of view, than the moral errors of a Benvenuto Cellini affect our pleasure in his craftsmanship. The poet's soul responded to the poetry of worship, a poetry which underlies all forms and ceremonies, which no unworthiness on the part of the officiant can wholly obliterate, no superstition render wholly absurd. He recognises and rebukes the hypocrisy of many who minister in the name of Holy Church, but he is quick to separate wanton friar and idle priest from the religion whose dignity they profane. The fact that religion lies in the spirit rather than the observance is very clearly stated in the *Romaunt of the Rose*, ll. 6225–94.

As has been said, it is on the emotional side that Catholicism appeals to him. Intellectually he finds many difficulties, and more than once his poetry shows a tinge of scepticism which might well have brought him into serious difficulties had his patron been a man less powerful and less inclined to tolerate heretical sympathies than John of Gaunt. Again and again Chaucer comes to the edge of an abyss, and, after one glance into the depths, turns away with a shrug of the

shoulders and a half-whimsical, half-satirical smile on his lips. Does God ordain man's life for him, from beginning to end, and has he no choice or freedom of action left him? Chaucer plays with the question, turns it over, makes it a trifle ridiculous by applying it to the death of a cock, and then, as we have seen, tosses it aside with

I wol not han to do of swich matere;

The long disquisition on the subject—chiefly taken from his favourite philosopher, Boëthius—which he puts into the mouth of Troilus (*Troilus and Criseyde*, Book IV, stanzas 137–154) proves nothing, except Chaucer's interest in the subject, which leads him to translate and insert so long a passage, and the natural inclination to fatalism of Troilus himself.

The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* begins with a characteristic shelving of an important question:—

A thousand tymes have I herd men telle,
That ther is joye in heven and peyne in helle;
And I accorde wel that hit is so;
But natheles, yit wot I wel also,
That ther nis noon dwelling in this contree,
That either hath in heven or helle y-be,
Ne may of hit non other weyes witen
But as he hath herd seyd, or founde it writen

True, the poet goes on to protest the absurdity of refusing credence to everything that we cannot see with our own eyes, but involuntarily we find ourselves recalling his refusal to commit himself as to the probable fate of Arcite's soul, and the fact that Arcite, although a hero, was a heathen, does not seem entirely to account for it.

This tendency to dwell upon insoluble problems manifests itself also in the strange attraction that dreams have for Chaucer. He is not content simply to use the conventional dream setting for his poems. He is continually harking back to the question: Do dreams contain some mysterious warning by which men may escape a threatened fate? In the *Nonnes Prestes Tale* the subject is treated satirically. Pertelote's arguments against belief in dreams are excellent, and most convincing. All sensible people must share her opinion that Chauntecleer is probably suffering from indigestion. Yet—the dream comes true. Only the fact that the whole story takes place in the hen-yard makes it impossible to take it seriously. But in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer deliberately interpolates three, quite unnecessary, stanzas in Book V, in which he discusses whence dreams spring:—

For prestes of the temple tellen this,
That dremes been the revelaciouns
Of goddes, and as wel they telle, y-wis,
That they ben infernals illusiouns;
And leches [1] seyn, that of complexiouns [2]
Proceden they, or fast, or glotonye,[3]
Who woot in sooth thus what they signifye? . . .

Again in the opening lines of the *Hous of Fame* he asks the same question:—

God turn us every dreem to gode!
For hit is wonder, by the rode,
To my wit, what causeth swevenes [4]
Either on morwes, or on evenes;
And why th' effect folweth of somme,
And of somme hit shal never come. . . .

and again, characteristically, refuses to give any opinion on the matter—

For I of noon opinioun
Nil as now make mencioun.

But if Chaucer is chary of committing himself on speculative matters such as these, with regard to practical morality he has no such hesitation. It was the fashion of the day to draw a moral from the most unlikely stories, and Chaucer, while he never forces an application after the manner of Gower or the com-

[1] doctors. [2] temperament. [3] gluttony. [4] dreamers.

piler of the *Gesta Romanorum*, is sufficiently in sympathy with the spirit of his age to conform to the practice when opportunity occurs. The Somnour, who, by the way, has just had a violent quarrel with the Friar, preaches an admirable homily against Ire, illustrating it, after the most approved method, with an apt anecdote. The Pardoner, as we have seen, inveighs against drunkenness, as does Chaucer himself in the *Man of Lawes Tale*. The simple statement of Averagus—

> Southe is the hyeste thing that man may kepe—

is a sermon in itself, and the Maunciple ends his distinctly unmoral tale with some excellent advice of his dame's:—

> My sone, keep wel thy tonge, and keep thy freend,
> A wikked tonge is worse than a fend [1]
> My sone, god of his endelees goodnesse
> Walled a tonge with teeth and lippes eek,
> For man sholde him avyse what he speke. . . .

It would be possible to multiply instances almost indefinitely. Perhaps the most striking of all is the sudden, unexpected moral application which ends *Troilus and*

[1] fiend.

Criseyde. We have followed the passion and sins of the lovers, we have wept with Troilus and forgiven Cressida in spite of ourselves, and all at once, while our minds are still tuned to the rapture and sweetness of a love-story, Chaucer turns to bid us note the end of life and love:—

O yonge fresshe folkes, he or she,
In which that love up groweth with your age,
Repeyreth hoom from worldly vanitee,
And of your herte up-casteth the visage
To thilke god that after his image
Yow made, and thinketh al nis but a fayre
This world, that passeth sone as floures fayre.

And loveth him, the which that right for love
Upon a cros, our soules for to beye
First starf, and roos,[1] and sit in heven a-bove;
For he nil falsen no wight, dar I seye,
That wol his herte al hoolly [2] on him leye.
And sin he best to love is, and most meke,
What nedeth feyned loves for to seke?

In politics, as in religion, Chaucer shows himself keenly alive to the evils and abuses of the day, and yet no partisan. The author of *Piers Plowman* has left us a picture of the bitter poverty of the peasant class. The complaint of Peace against Wrong (Passus 4),

[1] died and rose. [2] wholly.

shows how he has carried off his wife and stolen both geese and grys (pigs):—

He maynteneth his men to murthere myne hewen,[1]
Forstalleth my feires,[2] and fighteth in my chepyng,[3]
And breketh up my bernes dore[4] and bereth awey my whete
. . . . . .
I am noght hardy for hym unethe to loke;[5]

and how completely the poor were at the mercy of the rich. When a peasant died, his lord had a right to his best possession, and if he owned not less than three cows, the parson of the parish took the next best, a condition of things against which we find Sir David Lyndsay protesting, as late as 1560, in his *Satyre of the Three Estaats*. John Ball, "the mad priest of Kent," for twenty years combined the preaching of Lollardy with that of a kind of rough socialism, and the rude rhyme which contained the kernel of his teaching—

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?—

[1] servants. [2] fairs. [3] market.
[4] breaketh down my barn door.
[5] I scarcely dare look round, on account of him.

went the round of the Midlands and helped to fan the flame of discontent which finally broke into the wide-spread conflagration of the Peasants' Revolt. It was a time when new ideals were slowly struggling to find expression, and the old order of feudalism was passing away for ever. But while the nobles were divided by factions among themselves, and the poor beat bleeding hands against the prison walls that hemmed them in, the middle class was steadily increasing in wealth and prosperity, and it is with this class that Chaucer chiefly concerns himself. The majority of the Canterbury pilgrims are prosperous, well-to-do tradesmen and artisans:—

Hir knyves were y-chaped [1] noght with bras
But al with silver, wroght ful clene and well,
Hir girdles and hir pouches every-deel.
Wel semed ech of hem a fair burgeys
To sitten in a yeldhall [2] on a deys.[3]
Everich, for the wisdom that he can,
Was shaply [4] for to been an alderman.
For catel hadde they y-nogh and rente,
And eek hir wyves wolde it wel assente;
And elles certain were they to blame.
It is ful fair to been y-clept "*ma dame*,"
And goon to vigilyes [5] al bifore,
And have a mantel royalliche y-bore.

[1] tipped. [2] guild-hall. [3] daïs. [4] suitable.
[5] Service held on the vigils of Saints' Days.

This is something very different from Langland's [1] picture of Dawe the dykere dying of hunger, or the poor farmer dining on bean-bread and bran. Even the Plowman seems fairly well off:—

> His tythes payed he ful faire and wel,
> Bothe of his propre swink [2] and his catel,

and the general impression is one of comfort, which even rises to a certain mild luxury. The pilgrims are well fed and well clothed, they have horses to ride, and can afford to call at the ale-house as they pass. They fill the air with the sound of laughter and song as they ride, and we can well understand the Lollard Thorpe's complaint (made more than ten years after Chaucer wrote his *Canterbury Tales*) that, "What with the noise of their singing, and with the sound of their piping, and with the jangling of their Canterburie bells, and with the barking out of dogges after them . . . they (*i. e.* pilgrims) make more noise than if the king came there away with all his clarions and many other minstrels" (*Wycliff's Works*, ed. Arnold, I. 83). Even in the tales themselves little hint is given of

[1] The name Langland is used for convenience sake, to denote the author, or authors of *Piers Plowman*.
[2] his own labour.

the darker side of the picture. We get a glimpse of the relation between lord and vassal, in the *Clerkes Tale*, but no comment is made on it. Griselda is carrying her water-pot back from the well, when she hears the marquis calling her:—

> And she set doun her water-pot anoon
> Bisyde the threshfold, in an oxes stalle,
> And doun up-on hir knees she gan to falle,
> And with sad contenance kneleth stille
> Til she had herd what was the lordes wille.

Apparently there is nothing in this incident to attract the attention of a fourteenth-century poet. It is quite natural to kneel on the floor of the cow-shed when your lord honours you by seeking you there and giving his commands in person.

That Chaucer has no very high opinion of the intelligence or reliability of a mob is shown, not only by his sketches of crowds, but by such passages as that in the *Clerkes Tale* where he breaks off the story to apostrophise the people:—

> O stormy peple! unsad[1] and ever untrewe
> As undiscreet and chaunging as a vane,
> Delyting ever in rumbel that is newe,
> For lyk the mone ay wexe ye and wane;

[1] unstable.

A ful of clapping,[1] dere y-nogh a jane[2]
Your doom is fals, your constance yvel preveth,[3]
A ful greet fool is he that on yow leveth.

But at the same time he realises that poverty has its rights. The earlier version of the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* contains much excellent advice to King Richard:—

For he that king or lord is naturel,
Him oghte nat be tiraunt or cruel,
As is a fermour,[4] to doon the harm he can.
He moste thinke hit is his lige man,
And that him oweth, of verray duetee
Shewen his peple pleyn benignitie
And wel to here hir excusatiouns,
And hir compleyntes and peticiouns. . . .

The *Lenvoy* which ends the balade of *Lak of Stedfastnesse* holds up a noble ideal of kingship:—

O prince, desyre to be honourable,
Cherish thy folk and hate extorcioun!
Suffre no thing, that may be reprevable
To thyn estat, doon in thy regioun.
Shew forth thy swerd of castigacioun,
Dred God, do law, love trouthe and worthinesse,
And wed thy folk agein to stedfastnesse.

[1] chatter. [2] dear at a Jane, *i. e.* a small Genoese coin.
[3] Your judgment is false, your constancy proves evil.
[4] *i. e.* one who farms taxes.

And in the *Persones Tale* the duties of the rich towards the poor are set forth in considerable detail. Superfluity of clothing and absurdly slashed and ornamented garments are to be avoided because "the more that clooth is wasted, the more it costeth to the peple for the scantnesse; and forther-over, if so be that they wolde yeven such pounsoned and dagged[1] clothing to the povre folk, it is nat convenient to were for hir estaat, ne suffisant to bete hir necessitee, to kepe hem fro the distemperance of the firmament." Lords are bidden to take no pride in their position, and do no wrong to those dependent on them: "I rede thee, certes, that thou, lord, werke in swiche wyse with thy cherles, that they rather love thee than drede. I woot wel ther is degree above degree, as reson is; and skile it is that men do hir devoir ther-as is due; but certes, extorciouns and despit of youre underlinges is dampnable." Chaucer's inborn sense of justice will not allow him to condone oppression, and his speculative and inquiring mind is fully conscious of the artificiality of rank. From the Parson we might expect a homily on the fact that "we ben alle of o fader and of o moder; and alle we been of o nature roten and

[1] pierced and cut into points.

corrupt, both riche and povre," but it is more surprising to find the Wife of Bath holding forth in the same strain. Her tale describes the bitter feeling of Florent when he finds himself bound to a wife old, ugly, and of base degree. The bride answers with a disquisition on true nobility:—

But for ye speken of swich gentillesse
As is descended out of old richesse,
And that therfore sholden ye be gentil men,
Swich arrogance is nat worth a hen.
Loke who that is most vertuous alwey,
Privee and apert,[1] and most entendeth
To do the gentil dedes that he can,
An tak him for the grettest gentil man.
Crist wol, we clayme of him our gentilesse,
Nat of our eldres for hir old richesse.
For thogh they yeve us al hir heritage,
For which we clayme to been of heigh parage,[2]
Yet may they nat biquethe, for no-thing,
To noon of us hir vertuous living,
That made hem gentil men y-called be.

. . . . . .

Heer may ye see wel, how that genterye
Is nat annexed to possessioun

. . . . . .

Redeth Senek, and redeth eek Boece,
Ther shul ye seen express that it no drede is
That he is gentil that doth gentil dedis.

John Ball himself could hardly go further.

[1] in secret and openly. [2] birth.

Possibly Chaucer's personal experience of the occasional difficulty of making both ends meet, quickened his sympathy with poor men. It is true that Florent's wife, in the lines which follow those just quoted, goes on to defend poverty against riches on the ground that it is

A ful greet bringer out of bisinesse,

but though she calls cheerful poverty "an honest thing," she is forced to own that at best it is "hateful good." The Man of Law, in the prologue to his tale, speaks of it with undisguised bitterness:—

Herken what is the sentence of the wyse:—
"Bet is to dyen than have indigence;"
"Thy selve neighebour wol thee despyse;"
If thou be poore, farwel thy reverence!

. . . . . .

If thou be povre, thy brother hateth thee,
And all thy freendes fleen fro thee, alas!
O riche marchaunts, ful of wele ben ye,
O noble, O prudent folk as in this cas!

And Chaucer's lines to his empty purse show that he had no wish to share the pleasant security of those who are able, as Florent's wife says, to sing and play in the presence of thieves.

In yet a third respect, Chaucer shows him-

self able to discriminate between the use and abuse of a thing. He can expose and denounce hypocrisy without losing his reverence for true religion; he can point out evils in social life, without siding wholly with nobles or people; he can laugh at the folly which allows itself to be deluded by charlatanism, without losing his respect for science. Two hundred years had yet to pass before Bacon should raise science, once and for all, above the level where it lay confused with magic and the black art. A generation to whom gunpowder was a novelty, and spectacles an almost miraculous aid to sight, found nothing strange in the sight of learned men seeking for the elixir of life, or the philosopher's stone. In a world which was but just becoming dimly conscious of the mighty forces which lie at man's command, limitations were unknown, and the boundary line between the possible and impossible was so uncertain as to be negligible. The populace which believed that every sage could summon legions of devils to his assistance, was not likely to criticise his pretensions too closely, and doubtless many a quack saw, and seized, the opportunity for imposing on the easy credulity of a greedy and wonder-loving people.

Chaucer shows a real interest in such rudimentary science as he was able to pick up in the midst of his other avocations. Clocks of any kind were rare in the fourteenth century, and the practice of telling the time by astronomical observations was a common one. There is nothing peculiar in noting the season or the hour by such statements as that

the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne.

or,

He wiste it was the eightetehe day
Of April, that is messager to May;
And sey wel that the shadwe of every tree
Was as the lengthe the same quantitee
That was the body erect that caused it.
And therefore by the shadwe he took his wit
That Phebus, which that shoon so clere and brighte,
Degrees was fyve and fourty clombe on highte;
And for that day, as in that latitude,
It was ten of the clokke, he gan conclude;

but Chaucer not only follows this method with an amount of detail and a persistency which show that he enjoyed it for its own sake, he also, as we have seen, writes a treatise on the use of the Astrolabe, for the instruction of his little son. The modesty and sincerity shown

in the introduction are worthy of a true scientist. After saying that he purposes to teach little Lewis "a certain nombre of conclusions," Chaucer continues, "I seye a certein of conclusiouns, for three causes. The furste cause is this: truste wel that alle the conclusiouns that have ben founde, or elles possibly mighten be founde in so noble an instrument as an Astrolabie, ben un-knowe perfitly to any mortal man in this regioun, as I suppose. A nother cause is this; that sothly, in any tretis of the Astrolabie that I have seyn, there ben some conclusiouns that wole nat in alle thinges performen hir bihestes; and some of them ben harde to thy tendre age of ten yeer to conseyve." He then explains his reason for writing in English instead of Latin, and finally declares: "I nam but a lewd compilatour of the labour of olde Astrologiens, and have hit translated in myn English only for thy doctrine; and with this swerd shall I sleen envye." The whole *Prologue* is well worth reading if only for the light it throws upon Chaucer's view of education and the power it displays of entering into a child's mind. Scattered references to astronomy, medicine, chemistry, and even astrology, are to be found throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. The

Franklin shows himself well abreast of scientific discovery when he speaks of

> This wyde world, which that men seye is round.

Chaucer himself in the *Prologue* reels off a list of medicaments which might be expected to improve the Somnour's complexion. Pertelote shows a housewifely knowledge of the properties of herbs.

One tale, indeed, turns on the pseudo-science of the day. After the second Nun has finished her tale of St. Cecilia the pilgrims ride in silence for awhile, till, close to Boghton under Blee, they are joined by a Canon and his man. The Canon's Yeoman soon begins to boast of his master's marvellous powers, how

> That al this ground on which we ben ryding,
> Til that we come to Caunterbury toun,
> He coude al clene turne it up-so-doun,
> And pave it al of silver and of gold.

Whereupon the Host blesses himself, and asks, not unnaturally, why if the Canon "is of so heigh prudence," he wears such poor and dirty clothes? The Yeoman answers that

> —whan a man hath over-greet a wit
> Ful oft him happeth to misusen it;
> So dooth my lord . . .

and is proceeding to dilate upon the hard share of the work that falls to himself, when the Canon, who is nervous as to what he may be saying, with some sharpness bids him hold his tongue. The Host, however, has no intention of allowing his authority to be over-ridden :—

" Ye," quod our host, " telle on, what so bityde;
Of al his threting rekke nat a myte ! " [1]
" In feith," quod he, " namore I do but lyte."

On which the Canon sets spurs to his horse and gallops off, leaving his character behind him, and the Yeoman settles down to tell the story of the foolish priest and the charlatan. The false Canon borrows a mark from the priest, promising to return it within three days :—

And at the thridde day broghte his moneye,
And to the preest he took his gold agayn,
Whereof this preest was wonder glad and fayn.

The Canon protests that under no circumstances would he ever dream of breaking his word :—

" ther was never man yet yvel apayd
For gold ne silver that he to me lente . . .

and in token of friendship he offers, if the

[1] do not care a farthing.

priest will send for some quicksilver, to show him a marvel.

" Sir," quod the preest, " it shal be doon y-wis."
He bad his servant fecchen him this thing. . . .

The Canon then orders a fire to be prepared, and with much parade makes ready a crucible. He carefully shuts the door and pretends to be most anxious lest any one should see what they are doing. Not till the servant has gone out, and he and the priest are alone, does he solemnly cast various powders on to the blazing coals, " To blynde with the preest." Finally, while his unfortunate victim is busy blowing the fire and making himself generally useful, the false Canon so manipulates things that an ingot of silver appears in the crucible. He repeats the trick three times, and so impresses " this sotted preest " that the poor dupe

the somnee of fourty pound anon
Of nobles fette,[1] and took hem everichon
To this chanoun, for this ilke receit. . . .

After which, needless to say, the Canon disappears.

The whole story teems with technical terms, with descensories, and sublimatories,

[1] fetched.

and cucurbites, with bole armoniak and orpiment, and the like. It shows an intimate knowledge of the laboratory work of the day, of vessels and retorts, of chemicals and minerals and their various properties. At the same time, it proves that Chaucer was well aware of the ease with which a very little knowledge combined with a great deal of assurance would enable a quack to impose on the absolute ignorance of the uninitiated. The charlatan who tried to impose upon the author of the *Chanouns Yemannes Tale* would soon have found out his mistake.

And yet, with all his shrewdness, Chaucer was not wholly exempt from the superstition of his age. Such vulgar trickery as that just described would never have imposed on him, but he is too truly fourteenth century in his point of view always to distinguish between astronomy and astrology. The thought that a man's destiny may be written in the stars appealed to this lover of dreams. In the *Man of Lawes Tale* he breaks away from his original, to speculate on this subject:—

Paraventure in thilke large book
Which that men clepe the heven, y-writen was
With sterres, when that he (*i. e.* the Soldan) his birthe took

That he for love shulde han his deeth, allas !
For in the sterres, clerer than is glas,
Is writen, god wot, who-so coulde it rede,
The deeth of every man, withouten drede.

And again, after describing the grief of Constance at parting from her parents, he vehemently exclaims against the unfortunate conjunction of constellations which wrought such havoc, and asks if there were no " philosophre " to advise the emperor to consult some astrologer as to which was the auspicious time for him to marry.

Certain aspects of Chaucer's character stand out with unmistakable clearness in his works. The most careless reader could hardly fail to be struck by his wide sympathies, ready humour, keen observation, and honesty of mind. His idealism, his poetic sensitiveness to the more imaginative side of life, are perhaps less often insisted upon, but are no less real. He is no visionary, afraid to face the facts of life, dwelling in a world of beauty and delight which has no counterpart on earth, but a poet who takes no shame in human nature, whose eyes see so clearly that they are not blinded by evil, who dares to say, with his Creator, that the world is good. In the *Book of the Duchesse* is a passage which ex-

plains much of Chaucer's so-called worldliness. He is speaking of Blanche's innocent kindliness, and how he never knew one less

> Harmful, than she was in doing;

and he adds, in words as bold as Milton's own,

> I sey nat that she ne had knowing
> What was harm; or elles she
> Had coud [1] no good, so thinketh me.

He has little respect for a fugitive and cloistered virtue. But if he is, perhaps, overready to plunge into the dust and din of ordinary life, he never forgets the wonder and mystery that lie behind the commonplace.

[1] known.

CHAPTER VIII

CHAUCER'S INFLUENCE

Few poets have received more immediate and widespread recognition than Chaucer. Fifteenth-century poetry was almost wholly dominated by his influence, and one united chorus of praise and admiration rises from the lips of his successors. Shirley, who edited the *Knightes Tale* (amongst other works of Chaucer's) in the first half of the fifteenth century, speaks of him as "the laureal and most famous poete that euer was to-fore him as in th'embelisshing of oure rude modern englisshe tonge. . . ." Lydgate and Occleve, the most noted poets of the period, invariably refer to him as their master. As has already been mentioned, a large number of poems were written in close imitation of his style, and echoes of his verse are to be heard on every side.

It is usual to divide his followers into two groups: English Chaucerians and Scottish Chaucerians.

The English Chaucerians, with all their admiration for their master, show but scant understanding of his real greatness. Having little ear for rhythm themselves, they only mangle his verse when they try to imitate it; and while they fully recognise the debt which English versification owes him, it is but rarely that their own lines show any hint of his sweetness and melody. Lydgate is by far the greatest of them, and of him Professor Saintsbury justly remarks: "It is enough to say that, even in rime royal, his lines wander from seven to fourteen syllables, without the possibility of allowing monosyllabic or trisyllabic feet in any fashion that shall restore the rhythm; and that his couplets, as in the *Story of Thebes* itself, seem often to be unaware whether they are themselves octosyllabic or decasyllabic—four-footed, or five-footed." Instead of the suppleness and endless variety of Chaucer's verse, we have a treatment of metre which at its best is apt to be dull and stiff, and at its worst is intolerably slipshod. Only by some rare chance does a momentary gleam of beauty flicker across these pages, and a flash of poetic feeling raise the trite and conventional language to such a level as:—

O thoughtful herte, plonged in dystresse,
With slomber of slouthe this longe winter's night—
Out of the slepe of mortal hevinesse
Awake anon ! and loke upon the light
Of thilke starr. (Lydgate, *Life of Our Lady.*)

Nor is the matter much more inspiring than the form that clothes it. The English Chaucerians are worthy men, who spend their time in bewailing the errors of their youth and offering good advice to whoso will accept it. Of Chaucer's humour and realism they have no conception, nor do they realise the force of his digressions. The allegorical form of his earlier poems appeals to them, and, disregarding the movement and life of the *Canterbury Tales*, they ramble along the paths marked out in the *Hous of Fame* without attending to their master's excellent advice to flee prolixity. Lydgate, it is true, does show some narrative power. His *Troy Book* is obviously inspired by *Troilus and Creseyde*, and his *Story of Thebes* by the *Knightes Tale*, but he has neither the conciseness of Gower nor the dramatic insight of Chaucer. Among the 114 works attributed to him, it is only natural that some variety should be shown, and occasionally, as in the *London Lickpenny*,

a skit on contemporary life in the City, he shows some trace of humour. The *Temple of Glas* is a close imitation of the *Hous of Fame*, but it lacks the shrewd sense, the original comments on life, the subtle humour of its model. Lydgate is most poetical when his religious feeling is touched, as in his *Life of Our Lady;* and most human when he becomes frankly autobiographical. The stiffness of the *Temple of Glas* is redeemed by such passages as that in which the author (who entered a monastery at fifteen) describes the lamentations of those

> That were constrayned in hir tender youthe
> And in childhode, as it is ofte couthe [1]
> Yentered were into religion [2]
> Or they hade yeares of discresioun;
> That al her life cannot but complein
> In wide copes perfeccion to feine.

Occleve, who has even less poetic genius than Lydgate, is remembered chiefly because the manuscript of his *Gouvernail of Princes* (a poem of good advice, addressed to Prince Hal) contains the only authentic portrait of Chaucer—a sketch drawn in the margin by the author himself. The lines which accom-

[1] known.

[2] Entered were into religion, *i. e.* were placed in a monastery.

pany the portrait, sufficiently illustrate the estimation in which Chaucer was held. Their modesty and simple affection disarm criticism.

Symple is my goste, and scars my letterure [1]
  Unto youre excellence for to write
My inward love, and yit in aventure
  Wol I me put, thogh I can but lyte;
My dere maister—God his soule quyte,—[2]
And fader, Chaucer, fayne wold have me taught,
But I was dulle, and lerned lyte or naught.
Allas! my worthy maister honorable,
  This londes verray tresour and richesse,
Dethe by thy dethe hath harm irreperable
  Unto us done: hir vengeable duresse [3]
Dispoiled hath this londe of the swetnesse
Of rethoryk, for unto Tullius
Was never man so lyk amenges us.
. . . . . .
She myght have taryed hir vengeaunce a whyle,
  Tyl sum man hadde egal to thee be;
Nay, let be that; she wel knew that this yle [4]
  May never man forth bringe like to thee,
  And her office needes do must she;
God bad her soo, I truste as for the beste,
O maystir, maystir, God thy soule reste!

His consciousness of the superiority of his master did not, however, prevent him from

[1] Simple is my mind, and little my learning.
[2] repay. [3] revengeful cruelty. [4] isle.

venturing to make use of the same material, and in the *Chaste Spouse of the Emperor Gerelaus* he re-tells the story of Constance.

A number of minor poets make up the list. Benedict Burgh—the shadow of Chaucer's shadow—completed *The Secrets of the Philosophers*, a peculiarly dull poem which Lydgate left unfinished at his death. Side by side with him worked George Ashby, clerk of the signet to Queen Margaret, and a little later comes Henry Bradshaw, a monk of St. Werburgh's Abbey at Chester. They are all worthy, honest men, who utter moral platitudes with an air of conviction; painstaking but unskilful apprentices in the workshop of poetry, who conscientiously blunt their tools and cut their fingers in a vain effort to do the work of master craftsmen. One curious little development is, however, worth noticing. In the latter half of the fifteenth century two poets, Sir George Ripley and Thomas Norton, wrote treatises on alchemy, in verse. Ripley's *The Compound of Alchemy, or the Twelve Gates*, and Norton's *Ordinall of Alchemy*, owe their interest in the first place to the proof they afford that verse at the time was a natural means of instruction rather than an end in itself; and in the second to their adventitious

connection with the *Chanouns Yemannes Tale*. Norton endeavours to copy the Chaucerian couplet, and Professor Saintsbury suggests that he is probably the Th. Norton whom Ascham, in his *Scholemaster*, classes with Chaucer, Surrey, Wyatt and Phaer, as having vainly attempted to replace accent by rhyme.

Stephen Hawes falls into a class somewhat apart. Writing at the close of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century, he stands at the parting of the ways, and while his poetry shows signs of the new influences that were at work, his heart is evidently with the old conventions which are beginning to pass away. His chief poem, *The Pastime of Pleasure, or the Historye of Graunde Amoure and la Bell Pucell: containing the Knowledge of the Seven Sciences and the Course of Man's Life in this World*, is sufficiently described by its title. It stands, as it were, half-way between Chaucer and Spenser, at one moment clearly recalling the love scenes of *Troilus and Criseyde*, at another reminding us equally forcibly of the elaborate and ingenious allegory of the *Faerie Queene*. The combination of chivalry and allegory was something new, and though Hawes himself proved incapable of

making the most of its possibilities, English literature owes him a real debt. He never rises to any great height. Mr. Murison, in his chapter on Hawes in Vol. II of the *Cambridge History of Literature*, draws attention to certain verbal resemblances between the *Passetyme of Pleasure* and the *Faerie Queene*, but the passages quoted serve only to show how far removed the music of Spenser is from the speech of ordinary men. At his worst Hawes sinks beneath the lowest level of what can possibly be allowed to pass as verse. The dialogue between Graunde Amour and Dame Grammar defies parody :—

"Madame," quod I, "for as much as there be
Eight partes of speche, I would knowe right faine,
What a noune substantive is in his degree;
And wherefore it is so called certaine?
To whom she answered right gentely againe
Saing alway that a noune substantive
Might stand without helpe of an adjective.

That the stanza of *Troilus and Criseyde* should be used for such stuff as this is unbearable.

The Scottish Chaucerians are of far more intrinsic importance. The love-allegory of the *Kingis Quair* shows the influence of

Chaucer not only in its use of the Chaucerian stanza—henceforth to be known as the rhyme royal—but in the evidence it affords of its author's acquaintance with the English version of the *Romance of the Rose*. Moreover, in it may be noticed that sympathy with the freshness and joy of nature which forms so strong a bond between Chaucer and his Scottish disciples, and is so conspicuous by its absence in the work of the English Chaucerians. Emily herself might well walk in the garden where

> . . . on the smale grene twistis [1] sat
> The little sweete nyghtingale, and song
> So loud and clear, the hymnes consecrate
> Of loves use, now softe now loud among,
> That all the gard(e)nes and the walles rong
> Ryght of their song, and on the copill [2] next
> Of their sweet harmony, and lo the text:
>
> "Worschippe, ye that loveres be(ne) this May,
> For of your bliss the kalendes are begonne,
> And sing with us, away winter, away,
> Come sumer, come, the sweet season and sonne,
> Awake, for schame! that have your heavenes wonne,
> And amourously lift up your heades all,
> Thank Love that list you to his merci call;"

[1] twigs. [2] stanza.

and the picture of Joan Beaufort,

The fairest or the freschest yong(e) floure
That ever I sawe, me thoght, before that houre;

has something of Chaucer's daintiness and grace.

The Scottish poets have, also, far more sense of form than the English. Henryson's *Testament of Cressid*, written to satisfy its author's thirst for poetic justice and to show Cressida paying the penalty of her misdeeds, with all its conventional morality, for sincerity of feeling and felicity of style will bear comparison with its great original. His fables show a quick sense of humour, a combination of tenderness and realism which recall Chaucer again and again. The feast spread by the Burgis Mouse for the Uplandis Mouse is delightful:—

After when they disposed were to dine,
Withouten grace they wash'd and went to meat,
With all the courses that cooks could define,
Mutton and beef laid out in slices greet;
And lordis fare thus could they counterfeit,
Except one thing, they drank the water clear
Instead of wine, but yet they made good cheer.

Gawain Douglas, Bishop of Dunkeld, was

perhaps most nearly akin to the English Chaucerians. A scholar and a man of distinguished position, he has none of the lightness of Henryson. He takes poetry seriously, and inclines to trace a moral purpose even in the Æneid. His *Palice of Honour* well illustrates the manner in which Chaucer's successors made free with the framework of his poems, while at the same time it shows the growing delight in picturesque effect which was one day to break into the Elizabethan glow of colour. The poet finds himself wandering in a dreary wilderness and breaks out in complaint against Fortune, who has led him there. As he laments, he sees approaching him a rout "of ladyis fair and gudlie men":—

Amiddes(t) whom borne in a golden chair
O'er-fret with pearl and stones most preclair [1]
That draw(e)n was by hackneys all milk-white
Was set a Queen, as lily sweet of swair [2]
In purple robe, hemmed with gems each gair [3]
Which gemmed claspes closed all perfite [4]
A diadem, most pleasantly polite,
Set on the tresses of her golden hair.

The original form, which illustrates the comparatively modernness of the language used by Chaucer, is as follows:

[1] precious. [2] neck. [3] gore. [4] perfect.

Amiddes quhome, borne in ane goldin chair
Ourfret with perle and stanis maist preclair
That drawin was by haiknayis all milk quhite,
Was set a Quene, as lyllie sweit of swair
In purpor rob hemmit with gold ilk gair,
Quhilk gemmit claspis closit all perfite.
A diademe maist plesandlie polite.
Set on the tressis of her giltin hair.
And in her hand a scepter of delight.

This is Dame Sapyence, and with her come Diana, Jephtha's daughter, Palamon, Arcite and Emily, Troilus and Cressida, David and Bathsheba, Delilah, Cleopatra, Jacob and Rachel, Venus (whose " hair as gold or topasis was hewit ") and a number more famous lovers of antiquity. A " ballet of inconstant love " follows. This offends Venus, and the poet is brought before her to answer for his lack of respect. Poetry, the Muses, and the Poets from Homer to Chaucer and Dunbar, form a Court. Calliope pleads for him, and he is allowed to atone for his misdeed by composing " A ballet for Venus' pleasour," which so delights the company that he is invited to join the cavalcade. After travelling through Germany, France, Italy, and other countries they reach the Fountain of the Muses. Here they alight :—

Our horses pastured in ain pleasand plane,
Low at the foot of ain fair grene montane,
Amid ain mead shaddowit with cedar trees,

where

. . . beriall stremis rinnand ouir stanerie greis[1]
Made sober noise, the shaw dinned agane
For birdis song and sounding of the beis.[2]

In the midst of the field Douglas finds a gorgeous pavilion in which knights and ladies are feasting, while a poet relates the brave deeds of those who in the past proved "maist worthie of thair handis." After listening to these heroic tales the company once more sets out. Beyond Damascus they reach their journey's end. The poet is guided by a nymph to the foot of a steep mountain, at the summit of which stands the Palace of Honour. As he climbs he sees before him a dreadful abyss out of which proceed flames. His ears are filled with the sound of terrible cries; on either side lie dead bodies. These beings in torment are they who set out to pursue Honour, but "fell on sleuthfull sleip," and so were "drownit in the loch of cair." (It has been suggested by critics bent on finding an original for the *Pilgrim's Progress*, that Bunyan found in this the idea of his

[1] grey stones. [2] bees.

"byway to Hell.") At last he reaches the Palace, where he is shown many treasures, including Venus' mirror, which reflects "the deidis and fatis of euerie eirdlie wicht." Prince Honour is attended by all the virtues, and the poem ends by contrasting worldly and heavenly honour and commending virtue.

The gracious figure of Sapience, her dress gleaming with jewels, her head crowned with a diadem, is very different from any being of Lydgate's or Occleve's creation; already the first rays of Renaissance light are showing above the horizon, and the cold gray mists of fifteenth-century poetry are dispersing before its warmth and brilliance; but the radiance that heralds the new era is that of sunrise, flushing the world with a wonder of colour, rather than of that light of common day in which Chaucer is content to walk. In the great age to come, the Elizabethans are to show how the rapture and intoxication of beauty may be combined with the sternest realism, but in the early sixteenth century the children of the new birth walk with uncertain steps towards the dawn.

The poet who most clearly shows the growing love of beauty, and at the same time

is most truly in sympathy with Chaucer, is William Dunbar. No other poet of the period has such skill in versification, such freshness and vigour, or such variety. His humour is as all-pervading as Chaucer's. Now he addresses a daring poem to King James, slyly laughing at one of his numerous love affairs; now he writes the story of the *Two Friars of Berwick*, or the *Treatise of the Two Married Women and the Widow*, broadly comic fabliaux which might well have found a place among the *Canterbury Tales*. One of the wittiest of his poems is the *Visitation of St. Francis*, in which the poet describes how his patron saint appeared to him in a dream, bidding him wear the habit of a friar. Dunbar answers slyly that he has noticed more bishops than friars are among the saints, so perhaps it will be as well if St. Francis, to make all sure, provides him with a bishop's robes instead, and then he is sure to go to heaven. Whereupon his visitant reveals himself in his true character and vanishes in a cloud of brimstone. Two little lyrics on James Dog, Keeper of the Queen's wardrobe, are very characteristic. In the first, "whan that he had offendit him," each verse ends with the refrain:—

Madame, ye have a dangerous Dog;

in the second, when the quarrel had been made up, the refrain runs :—

He is na Dog : he is a Lamb.

As Mr. Gregory Smith points out, " Dunbar is unlike Henryson in lacking the gentler and more intimate fun of their master. He is a satirist in the stronger sense; more boisterous in his fun, and showing, in his wildest frolics, an imaginative range which has no counterpart in the southern poet " ; but his sincerity and virility, his boyish sense of fun, remind us of Chaucer again and again. The Reve would thoroughly have enjoyed telling the story of the flying friar of Tungland who courted disaster by using hen's feathers. Chaucerian, too, in the truest sense, is Dunbar's power of combining this keen sense of the ridiculous with a no less keen appreciation of beauty. The charm of his verse is incontestible, and his skill in making effective use of burdens and refrains shows an ear sensitive to music. *The Thistle and the Rose*, written in honour of the marriage of James IV and Margaret Tudor, borrows its idea from the *Parlement of Foules*, and has something of Chaucer's tenderness and charm. Dame Nature commands all birds, beasts, and

flowers to appear before her, and after some debate proceeds to crown the thistle with rubies, while the birds unite in singing the praises of the "freshe Rose of colour red and white."

The *Golden Targe*, an allegorical poem of the conventional type, in which the shield of Reason proves no defence against the arrows of Beauty, contains a description of spring which Chaucer himself never equalled:—

Full angel-like the birdes sang their houres
Within their curtains green, into their boweres
Apparelled white and red with blossoms sweet;
Enamelled was the field with all coloures
The pearly dropes shook in silver showeres
While all in balm did branch and leaves flete[1]
To part from Phœbus did Aurora weep;
Her crystal tears I saw hang on the floweres
Which he for love all drank up with his heat.

. . . . . .

For mirth of May with skippes and with hoppes
The birdes sang upon the tender croppes[2]
With curious notes as Venus chapell clerkes;
The rose yong, new spreding of her knoppes[3]
War powdered bright with hevenly beriall[4] droppes
Through beames red, burning as ruby sparkes
The skyes rang for shouting of the larkes.

[1] float. [2] tree-tops. [3] buds. [4] drops clear as beryl.

And in addition to all these, Dunbar writes serious religious poetry on such subjects as *Love, Earthly and Divine,* draws a by no means unimpressive picture of the *Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins,* and in his *Lament for the Makaris* (poets), with its haunting refrain:—

Timor Mortis conturbat me

shows a sense of the transitoriness of all earthly pleasure.

Enough has already been said to show that the influences that moulded sixteenth-century literature in England were not such as to lead its poets to model themselves on Chaucer. In the *Golden Targe,* Dunbar gives expression to the popular view of Chaucer in his day:—

O reverend Chaucer, rose of rethoris [1] all,
As in our tongue a flower imperial,
That rose in Britain ever, who readeth right,
Thou bear'st, of makers [2] the triumph royal;
Thy fresh enamelled termes celestial
This matter could illumined have full bright,
Wert thou not of our English all the light,
Surmounting every tongue terrestrial
As far as Mayes morrow doth midnight?

And here again, as in Occleve, we see that it is for his language rather than for his invention that the poet is praised. But the sixteenth

[1] flower of all rhetoricians. [2] poets.

century saw the change from Middle English to Modern, a change which, for the time being, lost men the key to Chaucer's verse. Old inflections had gradually dropped off, the accented " e " which ends so many of Chaucer's words had become mute, and the result was that the poets of the new age found Chaucer's lines impossible to scan. A generation whose taste was formed on Classical and Italian models, whose precisians urged the necessity of discarding " bald and beggarly rhymning " in favour of the classical system of accent, had not patience enough to rediscover the laws that governed Chaucer's verse. It says much for the insight and geniune poetic taste of Elizabethan critics that they one and all speak of Chaucer with admiration and respect. Fresh editions of his works continued to appear at frequent intervals throughout the century, and frequent references to his name show that they were well known to the poets of the period. To Spenser he is " The God of shepheards " :—

Who taught me homely, as I can, to make.
He, whilst he lived, was the soueraigne head
Of shepheards all, that been with loue ytake;

and he goes on to protest that

. . all hys passing skil with him is fledde,
The fame whereof doth dayly greater growe.

The famous reference in the *Faerie Queene* to

Dan Chaucer, well of Englishe undefyled,
On Fames eternal beadroll worthie to be fyled,

has become part of the Chaucerian critic's stock in trade, and is as apt and as well-known as Dryden's phrase which speaks of Chaucer as "a perpetual fountain of good sense." Book III, canto xxv of the *Faerie Queene* contains a paraphrase of some of the lines on true love in the *Frankleyns Tale*, and Book IV boldly promises to continue the story of

Couragious Cambell, and stout Triamond,
With Canacee and Cambine linckt in lovely bond.

Whether the Spenserian stanza is a modification of the rhyme royal or of the stanza used by Boccaccio and Ariosto it is impossible to say—all three are obviously related to each other—but in view of Spenser's admiration for Chaucer, and his deliberate attempt to use "Chaucerisms," it is at least probable that in this respect the *Faerie Queene* owes a debt to *Troilus and Criseyde*. In *Mother Hubbard's Tale* and *Colin Clouts come home*

again, Spenser is frankly, though unsuccessfully, imitating Chaucer's style. William Browne, the poet of Tavistock, also showed his admiration for Chaucer by an attempt to imitate him in his *Shepheard's Pipe*, a series of eclogues modelled partly on the *Shepherd's Calendar* and partly on the *Canterbury Tales*. In the concluding lines of the first eclogue, which contains the story of Jonathas, Browne confesses his indebtedness to Occleve:—

> Scholler unto Tityrus
> Tityrus the bravest swaine
> Ever lived on plaine . . .

thus using for Chaucer the name bestowed on him by Spenser.

During the seventeenth century Chaucer's fame seems to have suffered a temporary eclipse. Between 1602 and 1687 not a single edition of his works appeared, and the edition of 1687 is in reality no more than a re-issue of Speght's. The poets hardly mention his name. Milton does indeed make a reference to the *Squieres Tale*, but his works show no trace of Chaucer's influence. Towards the end of the century, however, there was a revival of interest. Dryden tells us that Mr. Cowley declared he had no taste of him, but my lord of Leicester, on the other hand,

was so warm an admirer of the *Canterbury Tales* that he thought it "little less than profanation and sacrilege" to modernise their language, and not until his death did Dryden venture to turn into modern English the tales of the Knight, the Nun's Priest, and the Wife of Bath, and the character of the poor Parson in the *Prologue*. The wigs and ruffles of the seventeenth century, however, suit but ill the sturdy figure of the fourteenth-century poet. We stand aghast before Dryden's Arcite, who, in the throes of death, exclaims:—

> No language can express the smallest part
> Of what I feel, and suffer in my heart,
> . . . . . .
> How I have loved; excuse my faltering tongue:
> My spirit's feeble, and my pains are strong.
> This I may say, I only grieve to die,
> Because I lose my charming Emily.

It is an excellent specimen of the poetry of 1699, but it is not Chaucer.

Dryden is, indeed, far more eighteenth than seventeenth century in feeling, and while the authors of the eighteenth century are too really great not to appreciate true poetry wherever they see it, their own taste leads them to the erection of "neat Modern build-

ings" rather than to the admiration of "an ancient majestick piece of Gothick Architecture," and all attempts to combine the two must necessarily be foredoomed to failure. Pope paraphrases the *Hous of Fame;* Prior writes *Two Imitations of Chaucer*, viz. *Susanah and the Two Elders*, and *Earl Robert's Mice;* Gay writes a comedy on the Wife of Bath, with Chaucer himself for hero; the Rev. Thomas Warton, who, as professor of poetry at Oxford, ought to have known better, writes an elegy on the death of Pope in an extraordinary jargon which he apparently considers Chaucerian English. (See Miss Spurgeon's *Chaucer devant la Critique*, pp. 62–75.) But while these, and numerous other works of the same kind, prove that Chaucer was widely read at the time, they afford no evidence at all of his having any direct influence upon the general development of eighteenth-century poetry. His place as an English classic is firmly established, but centuries have passed since he wrote, and the point of view of the men of the new age differs too widely from that of their forefathers for any imitation to be possible, except by way of a conscious experiment. The most amazing of all modernisations was that of 1841.

Richard Hengist Horne, inspired, if we may believe his own words, by no less a person than Wordsworth, hit on the most unfortunate idea of issuing Chaucer's poems in two volumes done into modern English by a sort of joint-stock company of contemporary poets. Wordsworth himself, Leigh Hunt, Miss Barrett, Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, Bulwer Lytton and the Cowden Clarkes, were to be among the contributors. Landor showed his usual common-sense by refusing to take any part in it, and his letter to Horne on the subject is worth quoting: "Indeed I *do* admire him (Chaucer), or rather, love him. . . . Pardon me if I say that I would rather see Chaucer quite alone, in the dew of his sunny morning, than with twenty clever gentlefolks about him, arranging his shoestrings and buttoning his doublet. I like even his *language*. I will have no hand in breaking his dun but rich-painted glass to put in (if clearer) much thinner panes." It is comforting to reflect that the first volume proved a failure, and the second never saw the light.

Fortunately the labours of such scholars as Professor Skeat and Dr. Furnivall have saved us from all fear of being left in future to the tender mercies of the moderniser. However

great may be the changes that are to pass over our language, however strange the tongue of fourteenth-century England may sound in the ears of our descendants, Chaucer's English has been preserved once for all, and never again can we lose the key to his world of harmony and delight.

In Chaucer I am sped
His tales I have red;
His mater is delectable
Solacious and commendable;
His english wel alowed,
So as it enprowed,[1]
For as it is enployed
There is no englyshe voyd—
At those days moch commended,
And now men wold haue amended
His englishe where-at they barke,
And marre all they warke;
Chaucer, that famous Clarke
His tearmes were not darcke,
But pleasunt, easy, and playne;
No worde he wrote in vayne.

(Skelton, introductory lines to the *Book of Phillip sparow*, 1507?)

[1] proved.

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